

The Mahabharata

(Volume 2)

A Modern Rendering



Ramesh Menon

A Novel

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(Volume 2)

Ramesh Menon

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THE MAHABHARATA
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UDYOGA PARVA

**AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi
Saraswathi and say *Jaya***

ONE

THE COUNCIL IN UPAPLAYA

The morning after the wedding, all the kshatriyas gathered in Virata's sabha to discuss their other purpose. Being elders Drupada and Virata sat at the head of that council; beside Drupada sat Balarama and Satyaki. Yudhishtira and Krishna sat next to Virata. Draupadi's sons were there, five young lions, with their fathers and uncles: Bheema, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. Krishna's sons were there, too, Pradyumna and Samba. Abhimanyu sat between Arjuna and Krishna.

The sabha got underway. At first, there was some polite chat, mainly about the wedding. When everyone had taken his place, Krishna rose to speak and silence fell.

The Dark One said, "There is no one here who does not know that perfidy sent the Pandavas into exile; we all know about the game of dice and how Shakuni cheated Yudhishtira. Yudhishtira lost his kingdom, his wealth, his army, everything he owned, not on the field of battle but at a low game where he never stood any chance of winning. Thirteen years the Pandavas and Draupadi spent in the wilderness like beggars.

Though Yudhishtira could have crushed Duryodhana in war and taken back what was his, he never did so. Though many of us urged him to take arms against his cousin and promised him our support. As kings yourselves, you might imagine the ordeal of the Pandavas and their queen in the wilderness. Now their exile is over and the sons of Pandu are back with us. We have met here today to decide what they should do next.

For myself, I urged Yudhishtira thirteen years ago to kill the Kauravas and take the entire Kuru kingdom. Duryodhana and his brothers deserve to die for what they did. Yudhishtira is a man of dharma; not for me would he abandon what he thought was just. Even now, after all that he and his family have endured, this saintly man speaks only of peace. He speaks of dharma still."

Krishna paused and you could hear the morning breeze murmuring in the trees outside, for the silence in that sabha. He resumed, "We know nothing of what Duryodhana intends. I, for one, feel he will never give anything back to his cousins: that, already, he is preparing for war. But Yudhishtira insists we must ask him formally if he will return half the Kuru kingdom; half only, though to my mind the whole kingdom belongs to the Pandavas, since Pandu conquered

most of the lands the Kurus rule today. Yudhishtira does not want war. He does not want bloodshed, but peace.

I think we should send a messenger to Hastinapura and ask for half the kingdom. But first, let us hear what the rest of us have to say.”

Krishna sat down, unaccustomedly solemn today and for once, unsmiling. After a moment’s pause, Balarama rose. Wearing resonant blue silk, he towered over the sabha. “My brother has spoken impartially. He spoke of Yudhishtira’s dharma and, I am happy to note, said little that disparaged Duryodhana.”

Krishna had some idea of what was coming. His brother could hardly resist taking a different position from him, if for no other reason than that it was different.

Ponderously, Balarama continued, “Krishna says the Pandavas want only half the Kuru kingdom. Now this is noble of them and I think Dhritarashtra’s sons should be grateful. It is just the course to take to avoid a war. I agree that we should send an honorable messenger to Hastinapura to ask for half the kingdom.”

Krishna was a little perplexed; his brother seemed to be endorsing every word he himself had said. Balarama was only warming up. “The messenger should go to Hastinapura with his mission clear in his mind: to pacify Duryodhana. He must greet Bheeshma, Dhritarashtra, Drona, Aswatthama, Vidura and Kripa decorously.”

There was some murmuring at this. However, Balarama went on, impervious, “He must speak respectfully to Shakuni and Karna and be the soul of courtesy to Duryodhana and his brothers. He must submit Yudhishtira’s plea humbly in Hastinapura.”

By now, there were loud noises of dissent in the sabha and Krishna glanced at Arjuna with a twinkle in his eye. Balarama held up his hands to silence the protests. He said, “Duryodhana must not be provoked or antagonized, or all hope of peace will be lost! For, let me tell you, Duryodhana was not solely to blame for what happened. What about Yudhishtira’s part in the gambling? Should an emperor gamble away everything he owns, his brothers and his wife? There is no excuse for what Yudhishtira did. He was foolish.

I have heard the Kauravas repeatedly tried to persuade him not to play. But he would not listen to them.”

A shocked silence had fallen. No one spoke out of respect for Krishna and for Balarama himself. Balarama mistook the silence for approval, while his

brother sat smiling openly now.

Balarama ploughed on. “Yudhishtira is a notoriously bad dice-player. Yet, he must play. There were a hundred players in Hastinapura as bad as himself. Why did he choose to play Shakuni, who is the best player on earth? Yudhishtira is obstinate. Repeatedly, Shakuni beat him, but he would not stop. Again and again, Shakuni asked him if he hadn’t lost enough. Yudhishtira would not accept defeat. He played on, until he had lost even himself.

But how can Duryodhana or Shakuni be blamed if Yudhishtira insisted on losing everything he had to them?” He paused. He was not a natural speaker and fumbled for words. Yudhishtira had grown tense, but managed a rueful smile from time to time. Most of the sabha realized why Balarama was speaking like this: he had certainly heard a very special version of the game of dice from Duryodhana, whom he still doted on.

Quite oblivious of the effect his words were having, Balarama continued, “And since Duryodhana cannot be blamed for what Yudhishtira brought upon himself, we must be careful that our messenger speaks in a conciliatory manner to the Kauravas. I say we must prevent war at all costs. Our messenger must be a soft-spoken man, a master of diplomacy.”

Yudhishtira still said nothing, but the line of his jaw was tight and there was hurt in his eyes. Balarama had not finished, but before he could say any more Satyaki jumped up in rage, “A man’s words mirror his heart! There have always been both brave men and cowards in this world and all men are one or the other. Why, both types are found in the same family. From the same tree, grow branches that are either fruitful or barren. Yet, O Balarama, I am not as upset by what you say as by the silence of these others that let you speak without protest. Your foolish words are like arrows in the Pandavas’ hearts and you still haven’t finished!”

Satyaki had a powerful voice and he was an orator when roused. “I don’t see how anyone can think for a moment that Yudhishtira is to blame for what happened in Hastinapura thirteen years ago. And I cannot bear to listen to you accuse this saint among men, as casually as you do. How, my lord, do you say Yudhishtira had any choice in the game of dice? As a kshatriya could he refuse to play? Did they play in Indraprastha, where the game might have been fair? Isn’t it clear the game of dice was a plot hatched by Duryodhana and Shakuni?”

Satyaki was shaking and drew a breath to calm himself. “And now, hasn’t Yudhishtira served every last day of his exile and some more besides, from what I hear? Why should he send a humble messenger or a conciliatory message to

that monster? Isn't this the Kuru kingdom we are talking of, most of which Yudhishtira's father conquered and his brothers much of the rest? Why should Yudhishtira beg for it? Why should he be anxious about annoying Duryodhana?

Balarama, even if Yudhishtira were in the wrong, there is no need for him to placate Duryodhana; and Yudhishtira is far from being in the wrong. To keep his word he has spent thirteen years in the jungle. You will not find another man like him on this earth; he is as noble as Rama was.

Since you exonerate Duryodhana so completely, I ask you to consider the message Dhritarashtra's son sent from Hastinapura. We have seen Arjuna before the ajnatavasa was over. You must go back into exile for another twelve years.' Do you say, Balarama, this is what a loving cousin does?

You have a unique picture of what happened in Hastinapura on the day of the gambling: one so far removed from the truth that it is laughable. You never mentioned how Vidura begged Duryodhana to relent and return the Pandavas' kingdom to them. But your favorite sishya would not! Was it part of Duryodhana's dharma, also, that Draupadi was dragged into the Kuru sabha and Dusasana tried to strip her naked? My lord, there must be some limit to your fatuousness!"

Satyaki turned to Yudhishtira, "Send me as your messenger to Hastinapura. I will speak to that devil in the only language he will understand: the tongue of burning arrows. I will bring him to your feet, Yudhishtira, or I will kill them all, the cowards!"

He paused, as if a more attractive idea struck him. "And if it is war they want, why should we be afraid of them? Who in this world can stand against Arjuna and Krishna, or this Satyaki? Who will face Bheema? When Nakula and Sahadeva take the field, which Kaurava will ride against them? Who will fight Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumna? How will they contain Gada, Samba and Pradyumna? Which of them will face Abhimanyu?

Our enemies are rotted soft with the sins moldering in their hearts. How will they stand against the forces of dharma? We all know Duryodhana. He will never give back the kingdom and I think gentle Yudhishtira knows this as well as any man here. Why should our emperor, for whom we are all ready to die, demean himself with an obsequious message to a serpent who has always done his best to destroy him and his family?

No! Yudhishtira should send word to Duryodhana that he must return what no longer belongs to him, at once, or prepare to meet death on the field of

battle.”

Satyaki sat down with a final glower at Balarama. The sabha burst into loud applause. Yudhishtira smiled gratefully at the young Yadava. Krishna had an inscrutable and, now, rather faraway look in his eyes. The time had come for an elder to speak and Drupada rose. “What Satyaki says has the ring of truth. Duryodhana will never give back the kingdom without war; most likely, he already prepares for it. Dhritarashtra will stand with his son. Shakuni and Karna are with him. Bheeshma and Drona will be foolish if they take his part, but it is not impossible we find they do.

I differ with Balarama today. We must not send a humble message to Duryodhana; he must not think we are afraid of him. If there is any hope of his returning the kingdom without war, it is if he fears us. An animal like him does not understand gentleness or dharma, only violence and fear. We must send a messenger to Hastinapura; but he must carry our word in strength, not weakness.”

There were noises of approval from the council. Drupada went on, “But, to my mind, sending an ambassador to Hastinapura is not our most pressing concern. In all likelihood, our enemies already prepare themselves for war and so must we. Let word go out to all the kings of the earth who will ally themselves to us. I am an old man and I have some instinct for history. I sense a horrible war, formed like a fetus, growing in the womb of time and its birth drawn very near. A war such as this earth has never seen: a war between dharma and adharma, good and evil, for the right to rule the world. Let us not deceive ourselves with foolish hopes, but be well prepared.

There is an old saying that a kshatriya always agrees to support the man who goes to him first. We must not lose any allies because Duryodhana sent word to them before we did. Yudhishtira, this very day, let your messengers ride to the courts of Shalya, Dhrishtaketu and Jayatsena. Let the loyal Kekaya brothers not feel we have left them out of our deliberations. Let Bhagadatta be told of our plans and the hundred other kings we know¹. We must not underestimate Duryodhana. He is so charming he can turn our best friends against us, if we don’t make sure they are firmly on our side before he reaches them.”

Drupada glanced pointedly at Balarama. Drupada’s daughter had been humiliated in Hastinapura; she had been exiled. The Panchala king loved Draupadi more than his life. He would not rest until Duryodhana was dead. “Let me send my family priest as our messenger to Hastinapura. He is a wise and

distinguished man and used to dealing with kings. He will not be cowed by the opulence of Duryodhana's court, or cringe before the Kurus. Tell him what message to carry to Dhritarashtra, Bheeshma, Drona, Duryodhana and the others and he will deliver it without dishonoring the sender."

Smiling, Krishna rose again. "Drupada speaks wisely, though he speaks on the part of the Panda-vas; and that is natural, since his daughter is their wife. I agree with what he says. But I must make one thing clear: the Yadavas are keen to see Yudhishtira's kingdom restored peacefully to him. Strange though it may sound, I see the Pandavas and the Kauravas with equal eyes. I have no doubt that Bheeshma and Dhritarashtra, Drona, Kripa and Vidura will listen attentively to Drupada's messenger.

We came here for Abhimanyu's wedding. We are grateful to Virata that he has honored us by giving his lovely daughter to our nephew. The wedding is over and it is time we went back to Dwaraka. We hope Drupada's wisdom will prevail upon Duryodhana and his elders and there will be peace again between the Kuru cousins."

Balarama, who sat crushed by what Satyaki and Drupada had said, breathed a sigh of relief. Unpredictable as ever, Krishna had not turned against his brother in public, whatever he might have felt about his views.

Krishna turned to Yudhishtira, "If Duryodhana doesn't see reason, if he is determined to have war, send for us and we will come to fight for you. We shall see how they face Arjuna and Bheema away from the dice-board!"

On that note, the sabha in Upaplavya concluded. Virata bid farewell to his guests, sending them home with many precious gifts. Krishna and Balarama left with the Yadava army and went back to Dwaraka, Balarama rather chastened and Krishna with a growing instinct of the war that plunged ever closer along the maze of time. The Dark One also had a premonition of a piquant choice that would soon confront him in his ocean-city, the prospect of which he quite relished.

Yudhishtira and Virata began to prepare in earnest for war. They sent messengers abroad, to kingdoms far and near, to warn their allies of the impending war and enlist their support. News of this traveled swiftly to Duryodhana and he, too, sent his own envoys to powerful kings who were his friends.

Soon, armies on the move covered the earth. Some went to the Matsya kingdom to join the Pandavas, while others marched to Hastinapura to be part of

Duryodhana's legions. And surely, the greater number went to the Kuru capital; for in those days, Duryodhana was at the height of his influence and power.

TWO

A CHOICE FOR TWO KSHATRIYAS

Drupada sent his erudite and experienced priest to the Kaurava court. This man was a highborn brahmana and presented himself with dignity before the blind king, Bheeshma, Drona, Vidura and the other Kauravas.

Earlier, before he left the Panchala capital, Drupada had said to him, “You know the gravity of the mission on which I am sending you. You are aware of all the circumstances, the injustice the Pandavas and my child have endured. You know Duryodhana’s character. Vidura was the only one in the Kuru sabha who spoke for dharma on the day the Pandavas were banished. But Dhritarashtra paid him no heed.

Shakuni is a malignant creature; he is the heart of evil in Hastinapura. Duryodhana and the others have gone too far down the path of darkness to turn back now; there is no point talking to them. Address yourself directly to Dhritarashtra. He is old enough to fear death and wise enough, at least by his infirmity, to acknowledge his fear. Yet, he dotes on his son and you might not persuade him. However, though you address the blind king, what you say can influence those wiser than him: Bheeshma, Drona and Kripa. And I am sure the good Vidura will support you.

If you speak of dharma in Hastinapura, at least you will sow some doubt in the minds of Duryodhana’s followers. If you speak of how much their deeds are at variance with the ways of the Kuru sires, the Kaurava may well have to spend some time winning back their hearts. That will be time won for us and we can strengthen our forces. This is the real purpose of your embassy to Hastinapura, a subtle and vital one. Set out under the Pushyami nakshatra, at the time of day called Jaya.”

In Upaplavya, Yudhishtira and Virata called Arjuna. Yudhishtira said, “Krishna hasn’t committed himself to our cause. He even said the Kauravas and Pandavas are the same to him and Balarama seems to be against us. More than anything else, this worries me. I want you to ride to Dwaraka and ask Krishna for which side he will fight. He is always mysterious and I will have no peace until I know what he means to do.”

Arjuna set out alone for the city in the sea. He had not gone far, when Duryodhana’s spies learnt of his mission and word reached the Kaurava.

Duryodhana burst in on his uncle and main advisor, Shakuni.

“Arjuna is on his way to Dwaraka! What shall I do?”

Shakuni’s serpent eyes flickered for a moment. He said with rare urgency, “You must reach Dwaraka before Arjuna does and ask Krishna to support you in the war. Take your swiftest horses, go now!”

Within the hour, Duryodhana swept toward the ocean-city. Meanwhile, Arjuna went along with no doubt in his mind that Krishna would join the Pandavas. How would the love the Blue God bore his cousins allow him to fight for the Kauravas? Arjuna did not hurry, but went in faith and arrived in fabulous Dwaraka only after Duryodhana did.

It was early morning. The city of dreams lay languid on a sea tinted with the colors of a new day. Arjuna took his chariot across the bridge that led into Dwaraka; the city was just beginning to bestir itself. Still rubbing the sleep from their eyes, some Yadavas came out of their homes to worship the sun. They saw Arjuna, shouted his name in surprise and waved. He arrived in Krishna’s palace and a guard brought him to a waiting room. He saw Duryodhana sat there already, grinning smugly at him.

“Greetings, cousin! Whatever brings you to Dwaraka, young Arjuna? Could it be the same thing I have come for? But I came before you and I will speak to Krishna first.”

Arjuna sat as far away from Duryodhana as he could and said calmly, “What does it matter who came first or last? He who decides all things, for his own reasons, will decide this as well.”

“We shall see.”

Satyaki came into the room. He seemed agitated and flashed Arjuna a dark look as if to say, Why didn’t you come before him?’

He greeted them both perfunctorily and said, “Krishna is still asleep, but you can come in and wait beside his bed. He will speak to you when he wakes up.”

Duryodhana jumped up to follow Satyaki and Arjuna went after them at his ease. In his chamber, Krishna lay asleep. At the head of his bed stood an exquisite chair carved from dark rosewood. Duryodhana crossed to it and sat down. Arjuna went slowly to the foot of the Dark One’s bed and stood there, his eyes shut and his hands folded to the sleeper. Duryodhana fidgeted in his chair. He looked scornfully at his cousin; Arjuna stood motionless at Krishna’s feet, in

prayer.

Satyaki had barely left the room, when Krishna opened his eyes, yawned and saw Arjuna at the foot of his bed.

“Arjuna!” he cried. “When did you come?”

“Just now, my Lord.”

Krishna was all smiles. As he rose, there was a cough behind him. He turned to see Duryodhana, sitting stiffly in his chair. The Kaurava said, “Krishna, I came before Arjuna and it is only just that you hear me first.”

Krishna said softly, “How nice to see you, Duryodhana. And I am glad to hear you speaking of justice today!” He scratched his cheek thoughtfully. “Yet, when I awoke, it was Arjuna I saw first. Well, I must be fair to both of you, since you have come so far to seek my advice or help, or...what is it you have come for?”

Duryodhana said, “Krishna, we mean to have war between us. There is no point pretending otherwise, since both of us are mustering armies. I have come to ask you, Krishna, to fight for the Kauravas. And I came before he did.”

Krishna turned questioningly to Arjuna, who inclined his head to say that he, also, had come for the same reason. Duryodhana went on smoothly, “Krishna, they say you favor neither the Pandavas nor the Kauravas. It is only dharma you join the one that came to you first. The rishis all say you are the greatest man in the world. You must not violate dharma.”

Krishna nodded gravely at Duryodhana and the Kaurava smiled as if he already had what he wanted; and if Krishna joined him, the Pandavas would be finished! He would have won the war before it began. He would not be surprised if Yudhishtira abandoned the thought of fighting and went back into the jungle for another twelve years. Sending him here was a masterstroke of Shakuni’s.

Krishna said gently, “Duryodhana, I don’t doubt you came before Arjuna; but when I opened my eyes, I saw Arjuna first. To be fair, I cannot turn either of you away. So I will offer you a choice.”

Duryodhana began to protest, but now Krishna’s tone brooked no argument, “Moreover, Arjuna is younger than you are, Duryodhana and he must have the first choice.”

Again, Duryodhana wanted to speak and again Krishna would not let him. “Listen to the choice I offer before you protest. I feel you will both be pleased with my offer. Can you agree to trust me? For once the choice is made, it will

bind all three of us. I promise it will be fair to both of you: a choice after your own hearts and neither of you shall be disappointed. Will you trust me?"

Arjuna nodded at once and, after some hesitation, Duryodhana did as well. "Make your offer, Krishna."

Krishna said, "On one hand, I offer myself, just me mind you and I will carry no weapons during your war, nor strike a blow regardless of who wins or loses. On the other hand, I offer an aksauhini of Yadava warriors¹ and they shall bear arms and fight for one of you. Arjuna, you choose first."

Arjuna did not hesitate. "This is the easiest choice I ever had to make. I choose you, Krishna! Who else do I need in this world, or the next?"

Duryodhana had to restrain himself, so he did not laugh aloud. On one hand, an unarmed Krishna who would not strike a blow and a formidable legion of Vrishni heroes on the other: if he had the first choice, he would certainly have chosen the Yadava warriors. What could Krishna do if he did not fight? It was a laughable choice and what was more, the fool of a Pandava had made it for him.

"Krishna, are you sure you will not fight?"

"I swear it, Duryodhana."

"Arjuna has chosen and I am content," said the Kaurava.

He could not keep the glee out of his eyes and Krishna smiled to see it. Duryodhana thanked Krishna quickly and hurried away, thinking his war as good as won, since the Pandavas' most dangerous ally would not carry a weapon or fight for them. He was so overjoyed he ran straight to his master Balarama.

"My lord!" cried Duryodhana, kneeling before his old guru.

Balarama raised him up. "Duryodhana, I am glad to see you. Have you heard how I defended your cause at Upaplavya?"

"I have heard, my lord and I thank you! I have come to tell you how much what you said there has helped me."

"How is that? Krishna and Satyaki are against you."

"Arjuna and I saw Krishna together. He said he would be fair to both of us. He offered us a choice and asked Arjuna to choose first."

"I told you he favors the Pandavas."

"Oh no, my lord! In this instance, he has been entirely fair. In fact, Arjuna made a foolish choice and Krishna smiled at me as if to say, 'Now you have

what you want, Duryodhana!”“

“What was the choice he offered?”

Duryodhana laughed, “On one hand, himself and he will bear no arms, nor strike a blow during the war, whatever its outcome. And on the other, a legion of Vrishni warriors who will fight!”

A knowing look had crept into Balarama’s eye. He said softly, “And Arjuna chose Krishna?”

Duryodhana cried, “I would have chosen the aksauhini, even if I had chosen first.”

“I feared as much,” said Balarama with a sigh. “It was no choice he offered you.”

But Duryodhana was too excited to notice his master was not enthused. The Kaurava was already saying, “So, will you fight for me, my lord, as part of the Yadava legion? Then the Pandavas’ fate will be sealed.”

Balarama shook his head. “How can I fight against my brother? I have already told Krishna I will take no part in this war. If you and your cousins do fight, I shall go away on a pilgrimage to pray for all of you. And for Krishna.” He sighed again and put his arm around his pupil’s shoulders. Kindly, he said, “Duryodhana, among all my sishyas, you were always my favorite. You are a brave man, born in a noble house. Fight your war like the proud kshatriya you are. You are a jewel of your line, don’t bring shame on yourself.”

There was such pity in Balarama’s voice, which Duryodhana in his jubilation did not notice. The Kaurava embraced his guru and strode out to his chariot to ride back to Hastinapura with his wonderful news². How pleased Shakuni would be! When Duryodhana had gone, Balarama sat very still for a long time and a tear glistened in his eye. He rose and poured himself a bowl of wine.

There was no doubt now that there would indeed be war and blood would flow in scarlet streams. It would be Krishna’s great yagna, the one he had been born for and he would cleanse the earth with it. Balarama drained the bowl and set it down.

He whispered, “Oh, my brother, how savage are your ways. Choice! What choice did you offer? You knew both their hearts. The only choice you offered Duryodhana was his death.”

THREE

‘EVERYONE SEEMS TO KNOW ME’

When Duryodhana had gone, Krishna turned to Arjuna with reproach in his eyes.

“You made such a foolish choice! Didn’t you hear what I said, that I would carry no weapon during the war? Did you think the Sudarshana Chakra would be yours to cast at the enemy? I will not strike a blow, Arjuna. You had the first choice and you chose wrongly. Did you see the delight in Duryodhana’s eyes? Ah, what have you done, Pandava?”

Arjuna began to laugh. Krishna cried, “And laughing now? After being so rash.”

Arjuna said, “Don’t make fun of me, my Lord. I have what I came for, though I came slowly and arrived after my clever cousin. Krishna, I will raze the Kaurava army by myself. But will you be my sarathy? So I can fight in your name and in the name of dharma and rid the earth of the evil that chokes her. And if you will, my own name shall become immortal: for they will call you Parthasar-athy!”

Krishna’s accusing look evaporated. He took Arjuna’s hand and said, “I will be your sarathy, Partha. But are you certain you have made the right choice?”

“I know you, Krishna! Where you are, victory shall be. Life is a storm and you are our only shelter. You have come to the world to till this ancient land and let kshatriya blood in a sea to renew her. I will be your priest for that ritual, Krishna.

Spring will be greener, when we have finished our sacrifice. Rain-clouds will be darker and the colors of autumn more resonant. Winter will be purer and the summer more true because your blue feet walked the earth! My heart knows all this, why do you try to make me think it is otherwise? When Arjuna fights, Krishna’s will shall be done through him, not his own. Win or lose, no matter, for posterity will know that Krishna fought on the side of the Pandavas. Not I, or any of my brothers would have it otherwise.”

Krishna embraced Arjuna. Then he led him into another room in his palace, where Satyaki was pacing the floor. Krishna said, “Look, Satyaki, at what this Arjuna has done.”

Satyaki cried anxiously, “What did he do?”

“He chose to take my hand, even if it meant losing the war.”

Satyaki gave a shrill laugh. “I thank God! I was terrified Arjuna would make the wrong choice.” A shadow crossed his face. “But Duryodhana has gone to meet Balarama, to ask him to fight on his side. Kritavarman says your brother is already with him.”

Krishna said, “My brother will take no part in the war. He did his best to keep me out of it as well. But that would not do, would it?” He smiled, mysteriously as ever. “Balarama isn’t happy with his Krishna, but that can be set right later. The vital thing is, he will not fight.”

He took a grape from a silver bowl and chewed thoughtfully on its purple flesh. “It was surely Shakuni that sent his nephew to me in such haste and he will be overjoyed at the news Duryodhana takes back to him. That is the pity with people like Shakuni: they are satisfied with the skin of the fruit. But in the end, it is Arjuna and his brothers who will taste the flesh. This is always the way of time: that the righteous shall have lasting victory, while evil only appears to win and for a short while.”

He spat some seeds through a window, from the grape he had just eaten. “Anyway, I am thankful I did not have to turn Duryodhana down when he came to me. Now no one can say Krishna was not just. Though heaven knows what I would have done if I had not seen Arjuna standing at the foot of my bed when I awoke, while the Kaurava sat haughtily where I could not see him. I really wonder what I would have done.”

Satyaki said quietly, “Shall I tell you what you would have done? You would have told Duryodhana that you had already decided to join the Pandavas. That is what you would have done. I know you, Krishna!”

“Do you really, Satyaki? Everyone seems to know me, these days, better than I do myself. A short while ago, when I questioned the wisdom of the choice he made, Arjuna said to me, ‘I know you, Krishna!’ Just yesterday, Balarama said the same thing. Shall I tell you what my brother said?

‘I know you, Krishna,’ he said to me. ‘You will not rest until you see this war fought. You are determined that Duryodhana and Karna must die and I will not fight against you. I don’t much care what happens, either; I don’t care who wins or loses, lives or dies. But I feel sorry for Duryodhana. Time will remember him as the man who sent the Pandavas into exile, the kshatriya who cheated at dice. But what about his other qualities, Krishna? His generosity, his charm, his

intelligence, his courage: who will say Duryodhana was a respectful pupil, a softhearted and loyal friend? He will be remembered only for one folly and not for his kindness toward Karna, whom he treats like his own brother. I ask you, would any of the Pandavas have been so generous to a man who is not their own blood, but a sutaputra. Would anyone?’

He sighed. ‘I wish I had gone to Hastinapura to negotiate with Duryodhana; he would never refuse anything I asked him. But that was not what you wanted, was it? I know you, Krishna. Only what you have decided will happen. The others are all your puppets and they don’t even realize it. Once Shakuni twirled loaded ivory dice; now you twirl the dice of fate in your hands, my brother. And they are loaded, too, with the deaths of Duryodhana and Karna, both of whom have never been given a fair chance in this life.’

He said again, ‘I know you, Krishna. I want no part in this war,’ and he stalked out.”

Krishna sighed, “My brother is very unhappy, Satyaki. I suppose it is true, what he says, that one fault has eclipsed all Duryodhana’s undeniable qualities. It is sad, but then this is a sad world, isn’t it? And should Yudhishtira, who is the noblest of men, suffer endlessly for no fault of his? Why should he? Because he is truthful and patient and because he never leaves the path of dharma? No, he has suffered enough for being righteous. The hour of reckoning has come, now Duryodhana must pay for his sins.

Shall Bheema not keep his oath, which he swore when Dusasana tried to strip Draupadi in the sabha of Hastinapura? Shan’t Draupadi have the revenge for which she has waited thirteen years? They shall! Or dharma has no meaning. But, Satyaki, my brother doesn’t really know me. If there was any way at all, I, as much as Yudhishtira, would prevent this war. But I do know Duryodhana. His hatred rules him and he will not relent. And I fear the war on the crack of the ages must be fought.” Softly he added, “As it was always meant to be.”

For a moment, he was plunged in some thought too deep to share. Then Krishna smiled brightly again at Arjuna and Satyaki. He put his hands on their shoulders and said, “But now we must hurry to Upaplavya. As Balarama says, the die is cast and Yudhishtira waits anxiously for us.”

FOUR

THE TWO ARMIES

Madri's brother and Nakula and Sahadeva's uncle, the mighty Shalya, heard that the Pandavas' exile was over. He was thinking of visiting them in Upaplavya, when Yudhishtira's messenger arrived in his court.

"My lord Yudhishtira wants you to know there may be war between the Pandavas and the Kaura-vas. He sends word to ask you to fight for him."

"Tell my nephews I will come at once to Upaplavya."

Shalya set out the next day with one aksauhini. It was some way from his kingdom to the Matsya city and the going was hard. Duryodhana heard of Shalya's march. He decided he wanted to win the powerful kshatriya to his side and strike the first blow off the field of battle.

Duryodhana arranged for luxurious camps for Shalya's army along its tedious progress. Wine flowed, the food was fit for kings, the music was sweet and the dancing-girls were seductive. Duryodhana even had his agents lead Shalya some way from his true route and feted him lavishly in mansions built within Kuru lands. Duryodhana's arrangements quite overwhelmed Shalya, who thought Yudhishtira was his host. Duryodhana had instructed his men not to reveal for whom they worked.

One day, in the fourth or fifth haven, Shalya was awash on his secret host's hospitality, particularly on the heady wine. He said to the servants, "Call your masters who serve my nephew Yudhishtira. I want to thank them."

A little puzzled, the servants bowed and withdrew. Duryodhana himself was waiting in that mansion. The servants came to him and told him what Shalya said. With a smile, the Kaurava walked into his unsuspecting guest's presence.

Duryodhana bowed and said, "I hear you wanted to see me, my lord."

"Duryodhana! But I thought..."

"I am pleased to be of service to such a great kshatriya."

Shalya got up and embraced him. "You have looked after me and my men with unforgettable affection. I must reward you! Ask me for anything and it shall be yours."

Duryodhana knelt before Shalya, "My lord, I want just one boon from you:

that you fight the war for me.”

Having given his word, Shalya could hardly refuse. “I will fight my nephews for you, Duryodhana. But I was on my way to meet Yudhishtira. You go back to Hastinapura and I will come there after visiting Pandu’s sons. You have my word.”

Duryodhana said, “I trust a kshatriya will not forget his word?”

“No, Duryodhana, my word is sacred. I will fight on your side.”

Duryodhana embraced Shalya. “Then hurry to Upaplavya and meet your nephews. So you can join me quickly in Hastinapura.”

And Duryodhana was gone. Shalya was left wondering if he had not been more than a little rash under the influence of the excellent wine with which the Kaurava’s men had plied him. He pushed the thought aside and gave orders for his army to march within the hour to Upaplavya.

Shalya was quite sober when he arrived in that city. When he saw his nephews and they welcomed him so warmly, he regretted having agreed to fight for Duryodhana. He embraced each of them, crying, “My poor children, what an ordeal you have been through. I am so pleased it is over now and you are back among us. Draupadi, my child, how good to see you again. And just as beautiful as you always were!”

When they sat together in the palace, Yudhishtira said, “Our trials are not yet over, uncle. It seems we must still have war with our cousins.”

He saw Shalya flush. Yudhishtira looked at him curiously. Shalya took a deep breath and said, “Yudhishtira, I have promised Duryodhana I will fight the war on his side.” He told Yudhishtira how he had been enticed into making that promise.

As he spoke, he saw Yudhishtira’s eyes fill. When Shalya finished and lapsed into a sorry silence, the Pandava said gently, “I understand how it happened, my lord. Duryodhana planned the whole thing. But it pains me that we will have to fight our own uncle in this terrible war.”

Red-faced, Shalya mumbled, “Yudhishtira, you know how much I love you. Especially when I think of your exile, I could cut my tongue out for giving my word to Duryodhana. But having given it, I must keep it.”

Yudhishtira was thoughtful. Suddenly, he said, “I think I have a way in which we can turn this defeat into a victory. As a kshatriya, you must not break the word you gave Duryodhana. But you must make me also a promise.”

“I will do anything except break my word.”

“It is not an honorable thing I am going to ask you, but it is something that must be done. When I think of all the enemies ranged against us, I truly fear only one of them: Karna. Only he can kill Arjuna, the rest are no match for my brother. Perhaps Karna is not his equal either, but my heart tells me to beware of him.

Krishna will be Arjuna’s sarathy during the war and Karna will want a sarathy who is as good as Krishna. We all know you are the finest sarathy on earth, my lord. At some time, Duryodhana will ask you to drive Karna’s chariot. I am certain Arjuna and Karna will come face to face on the field and the duel between them shall decide the outcome of the war. Dharma is with us but, somehow, I fear that against Karna dharma alone won’t suffice.”

“What would you have me do?”

Now Yudhishtira spoke as if he was another man. He whispered, “Talk to Karna when he rides into battle. Dishearten him! Compare him to Arjuna. Extol my brother to the sky and make Karna believe he is inferior to him. Fill his heart with doubt. Tell him a sutaputra can never be the equal of a kshatriya and a Devaputra. I know it is base; but I fear the earth shall be lost to us, if Karna fights as he can. His inconfidence is his only weakness, we must take advantage of it.”

A grim smile touched Shalya’s face. “Perhaps it was a Godsend, after all, the rashness which made me commit myself to Duryodhana. It may be that I shall be a deadlier foe when I am near him. As you say, it is hardly what a kshatriya should do; but when I think of the thirteen years you spent in the wilderness and of Draupadi’s shame, my blood cries out for revenge. Yes, at the critical time, I will whisper doubt and fear into Karna’s soul. I bless you, Pandava. Victory shall be yours and you will rule the earth as you deserve to.”

More than a little ashamed, Yudhishtira said, “Of all of them it is only Karna I fear. I am not sure why.”

It was as if some part of his mind murmured to him, insistently, that Karna was not what he seemed. Yudhishtira could never quieten the niggling fear he had of that warrior, not though Arjuna had beaten him convincingly outside Virata. When it came to a duel to the death, Yudhishtira was afraid Karna would prove invincible.

Shalya left Upaplavya and marched to Hastinapura with his legion. Duryodhana welcomed him like a brother.

The first of Yudhishtira's allies to arrive in Upaplavya was Satyaki, with his one aksauhini. Then, Dhrishtaketu, king of the Chedis, came with another aksauhini. Jarasandha's son Jayatsena came from Magadha with a glittering legion and the five Kekaya brothers, with theirs. Drupada arrived with his army, with the brilliant Shikhandi, whose roots were deep and strange, the fire-born Dhrish-tadyumna and with Draupadi's sons, the young tigers chafing to prove themselves worthy of their fathers in battle. Virata brought one aksauhini, as well, from his capital and came to Upaplavya with his sons and brothers and Uttara Kumara who was a celebrated kshatriya now! The Pandya king and Neela, king of Mahishmati, came with their legions.

Seven oceanic aksauhinis flowed across the earth, a tide of fighting men and swarmed around Upaplavya; and they were the Pandavas' to command.

But if immense legions came together at Upaplavya, the legions that swelled the ranks of Duryodhana's army in Hastinapura were vaster. Bhagadatta was the first to answer the Kaurava's call and he brought an aksauhini. Then Shalya arrived with his army, as did Bhoorisravas. Kritavarman came from Dwaraka with the promised Yadava force. Jayadratha of Sindhu, Sudakshina of Kambhoja, Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti, all brought an aksauhini each. And there was a host of other, lesser kings of the earth, loyal to Duryodhana, who answered his summons to war and their combined forces amounted to another three aksauhinis.

The Pandava army numbered seven aksauhinis and Dhritarashtra's son had eleven to call his own. Duryodhana kept his legions on the banks of the Ganga and employed another army of servants to cater to the soldiers' every need. The Kaurava was lord of the earth. After the years of the Pandavas' exile, his coffers overflowed with their wealth and his own. Duryodhana's army camped outside Has-tinapura was well cared for.

FIVE

THE MESSENGERS

Meanwhile, the brahmana from Drupada's court arrived in Hastinapura and was shown into Dhrit-arashtra's palace. He was an imposing figure, with clear, sage eyes. When Bheeshma, Dhritarashtra and Vidura heard the Pandavas had sent him, they received him with honor. When the brahmana's comfort had been seen to, the blind king called a council to hear what he had come to say.

When all the royal and powerful in Hastinapura filled the Kuru sabha, Dhritarashtra said, "The Pandavas have sent this good brahmana from Drupada's court as their emissary. Let us hear what he has to say."

The brahmana had been well looked after and perhaps they hoped to hear words of conciliation from him. He rose and a bright and imposing figure he was, that old man. He began, "This is an ancient house in which I am honored to speak today. My lord, yours is a noble line and all your ancestors who sat before you on the Kuru throne were men of dharma. Which is why the House of Kuru has lasted so long upon the face of the earth and its glory did not diminish."

The brahmana looked around him leisurely; he was at his ease.

"Yes, this is an august sabha into which I am privileged to bear my message. You all know, far better than I, the dharma that a kshatriya is sworn to. Dhritarashtra and Pandu are sons of the same father; no one doubts that. The world knows that Pandu conquered most of the present Kuru kingdom. Thus that kingdom belongs equally to the sons of Dhritarashtra and the sons of Pandu."

The brahmana lowered his voice, to make his point better. "The sons of Dhritarashtra have a kingdom to rule today. Why is it the sons of Pandu do not? The kingdom you bequeathed to them, Dhritarashtra, the wilderness that flowered when Yudhishtira sat on his throne in Indraprastha. In this house of dharma, time and again, Dhritarashtra's sons have tried to be rid of their cousins; even to kill them. Force was of no avail and Duryodhana and his uncle Shakuni resorted to deceit.

They took Yudhishtira's kingdom from him at a game of dice. The world knows that Shakuni is not only a master player, but also a master of cheating. It was not as if the elders of this sabha did not know Shakuni was using loaded dice when he played Yudhishtira. Yet, the Kuru elders sat and watched, as Shakuni took everything Yudhishtira owned from him. Was this the dharma of

one of the noblest houses on earth? Was this how Pandu's sons should have been treated in Pandu's brother's court?"

He paused and a hush had fallen on the council in Hastinapura. From the brahmana's tone, it was abundantly clear the Pandavas were not offering any compromises.

"But the Pandavas do not want revenge for all they have suffered. They only want back what is theirs by right. They want half the Kuru kingdom, which Dhritarashtra himself once gave them. I have come here to ask the Kuru elders to give back what belongs to Yudhishtira, what was to be returned to him once his exile had been served. Yudhishtira is a man of peace. He does not want a war in which kshatriya kind itself will be destroyed.

But if his kingdom is not returned honorably, he will have no choice left except to fight. Let this august sabha know that the sons of Pandu are far from helpless. Seven aksauhinis have gathered at Upaplavya. If Duryodhana does not put his greed behind him and relent, there will be a war like the world has never seen. Kshatriya blood will fall upon the earth like crimson rain!

When Satyaki, Bheema, Nakula, Sahadeva and Yudhishtira take arms against you, how will you resist them? When Indra's son Arjuna, with Krishna as his sarathy, blows at you like a gale of death, how will you contain him? O Bheeshma, Dhritarashtra, Vidura, you are all wise and experienced men. Kuru elders, I have come to ask you to persuade Duryodhana to relent. Do as I ask, I beg you; or the House of Kuru will be destroyed and with it, the very race of kings."

Having delivered his message, the brahmana sat down.

Bheeshma responded to him. "I am pleased to hear the Pandavas are well, that Krishna is with them and they have no wish to leave the path of dharma, though they have an army of seven aksauhinis. Yet you bring a haughty message from my grandsons, Brahmana and your tongue is sharp.

However, what you have said is not false and I honor your words. It is true the Pandavas have suffered as kings of the earth hardly do. They and their queen were forced to live like hermits in the prime of their lives. It is true that they, too, have an equal right to this kingdom of their fathers. And it also true there is no kshatriya in the world like Arjuna and any army will find it hard to contain him. Yes, all of us here know these things well."

Bheeshma had not finished, when Karna jumped up and cried, "Is there no end to this? We hear the same things repeated in this sabha. Brahmana, you have

said nothing new or very wise. Yes, we all know Yudhishtira lost a game of dice to Shakuni and he gambled away everything he owned, including his freedom. We know that without your telling us, messenger. But now Yudhishtira dares send you here to threaten the Kuru sovereign! Because he has Drupada's support? And old Virata's? Has Yudhishtira lost his wits in the forest, that he thinks he can threaten Duryodhana? Listen to me, Brahmana, Duryodhana will not give Yudhishtira a foot of land out of fear. But if it is for dharma, he will give away his entire kingdom! Have the Pandavas forgotten the real conditions of their exile? That if any of them was seen during the ajnatavasa, they would all go back to the forest for another twelve years. Yudhishtira himself agreed to this condition.

All of us here, why, the Kuru army saw Arjuna in the Matsya kingdom. Dharma demands the Pandavas live in the jungle for another twelve years. But the noble Duryodhana does not insist they do so. He is prepared to receive them here and have them live among us as his cousins and dependents.

It is not Duryodhana, but Yudhishtira who must leave the path he treads, which leads straight to disaster.”

Duryodhana smiled to hear his fierce, loyal Karna. The Kaurava nodded to agree with what his friend said and in appreciation of the manner in which he chose to say it.

Bheeshma was outraged. “Enough! I have heard enough of your brashness in this court, Karna. You speak too loudly for one who fled the field when you faced Arjuna in battle. Six renowned warriors from this sabha, I among them, could not contain Arjuna though he fought alone, with just a boy for his sarathy. Can you imagine what a force he will be with Krishna at his chariot-head? Just as surely as Karna ran for his life a few days ago, Duryodhana and all of us will die, if we are foolish enough to fight a war against the Pandavas.

It is not only that they are greater kshatriyas than we are and Bheema and Arjuna are a match for ten Duryodhanas and Karnas. No, eternal dharma is on their side and Krishna is Arjuna's sarathy! Many of you may be too young to realize what this means. But I have no doubt in my mind that, if we don't give back what is theirs to the sons of Pandu, we will lose everything, our lives as well. Doom is what awaits us and all kshatriya kind, if we don't stop this careen into madness on which Duryodhana leads us!”

Shaking, livid at Karna, Bheeshma sat down. Now Dhritarashtra said, “I agree with Pitama Bheeshma. He speaks for the good of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas and from his love for us all. When this good brahmana brings a

message of peace, Karna, how dare you speak arrogantly to him? We must not have this war, at any cost, or there will be bloodshed as not the eldest among us can imagine.

Brahmana, go back to my brother's sons. Tell them I will consider every aspect of this grave and perilous circumstance in which we find ourselves and I will send Sanjaya shortly to Upaplavya to tell Yudhishtira what we have decided. I must sit in careful consultation with my sabha before we arrive at a conclusion. Tell my son Yudhishtira he will hear from me soon. And I thank you, good Brahmana, for coming here on a mission of peace."

The brahmana bowed and went back to Upaplavya, where he conveyed all that had transpired in the Kuru sabha to Yudhishtira and his brothers, to Krishna and Drupada and the Pandavas' other allies. Now began the anxious wait for Sanjaya.

In Hastinapura, the king called for Sanjaya. This courtier, who was also the king's sarathy, was one of the few men alive with whom Dhritarashtra shared any of his true feelings. Since he heard how Arjuna routed the Kurus in the Matsya kingdom, Dhritarashtra had been terrified.

Now he said to Sanjaya, "Old friend, go as my ambassador to the Pandavas. Say I asked after their wellbeing, not only now, but also through their thirteen years of exile. Tell them I was never their enemy and I am pleased their ordeal is over. I have watched Yudhishtira since the day he first came to Hastinapura, when he was just a boy. I have never known a character so lofty and pure. I doubt the earth has seen many men to equal him in all her ages."

Sanjaya thought his king was on the point of breaking down and crying. Dhritarashtra said, "They are true and honorable, Sanjaya. My nephews are blameless; they walk the way of dharma. Who can hate them except my envious Duryodhana and that wild and thoughtless Karna of his? The world loves the sons of Pandu, all the Kurus love Yudhishtira."

The king trembled. "Sanjaya, I am alone and afraid. How can my son think he can rob the Pandavas of their kingdom? But, alas, he will not listen to anyone."

The king struggled against a darkness that engulfed him, choking his life. "Duryodhana is so foolish he does not see beyond his own vanity, or realize with whom he is dealing. They are not just his cousins; they are Devaputras! Why, if he wanted to, Arjuna could burn up the earth with his Gandiva. But Duryodhana does not understand this. Bheema could scatter the Kuru army as the wind does a

pile of grass. Nakula and Sahadeva are hardly less than Arjuna; they will hunt our men like eagles do sparrows.”

Another thought struck the king and he groaned. “Sanjaya, with Krishna on their side, what army of heaven or earth can withstand the Pandavas? Doesn’t Duryodhana know who Krishna is? That he dares fight against him. Ah, my son’s heart is as blind as his father’s eyes are.

Duryodhana thinks he has eleven aksauhinis against the Pandavas’ seven. His friend Karna assures him that greater numbers will win the war. But I know better and Bheeshma and Drona know better. Go to Yudhishtira, my good Sanjaya and tell him his uncle wants peace. Tell Krishna, also, that Dhritarashtra sues abjectly for peace. Tell Krishna to ask Yudhishtira to accept the peace I offer him. Yudhishtira will always listen to what he says. Old friend, this is the most critical mission of your life. God go with you.”

And the king gave Sanjaya a message to take to his nephews.

Sanjaya arrived in Upaplavya and Yudhishtira received him affectionately. When all the kings gathered in the sabha of that city to hear the message Sanjaya brought from Dhritarashtra, Yudhishtira said, “What news of our elders in Hastinapura, Sanjaya? Does our uncle remember us? And our Pitama? Do our cousins think kindly of us? Sanjaya, do you bring good news?”

Sanjaya said solemnly, “In Hastinapura, they do, all, surely remember you, Yudhishtira. My lord Dhritarashtra asks kindly after your welfare, your brothers’ and your wife’s. Your virtue has not been forgotten, or Arjuna’s prowess and Bheema’s strength. Nakula and Sahadeva are not forgotten, either, or their valor.”

Yudhishtira said, “Does Duryodhana remember Chitrasena and how my brother Arjuna rescued him from the gandharva?” Then, suddenly, his eyes were moist. “But, Sanjaya, I know that one good turn is hardly enough to achieve love between our cousins and ourselves. My friend, what effort have I spared to make peace with Duryodhana? How easy it would have been for me to attack Hastinapura, long ago, or to allow Chitrasena to kill my cousin. Alas, Duryodhana will not think of it like that, he is so deranged with greed and envy.”

Sanjaya said, “My lord, in the court of Hastinapura there are both good and evil men who surround Duryodhana and he is our virtual king after the Vaishnava yagna. But Dhritarashtra would be a fool if he were against you. He grieves for you and he has not forgotten your strength. During all the years of your exile, unknown to you, Dhritarashtra asked constantly after your

whereabouts and your wellbeing. He grieved deeply over what happened.

None of us can say what the future holds. Who would have thought the great Yudhishtira, who performed the Rajasuya yagna, would spend thirteen years in the forest like a rishi? Dhritarashtra says you are a man of perfect dharma. He depends on you to find a solution to the crisis between yourself and your cousins. He prays there will be no war between the sons of Dhritarashtra and the sons of Pandu. The king has conferred with his sabha and he sends you this message through me. Shall I repeat the words of my king?”

Yudhishtira asked him to, in that crowded court. Sanjaya began, “I, Dhritarashtra, king of the Kurus, send my greetings to my sons Yudhishtira, Bheema, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. I greet my dear Krishna, Satyaki, Chekitana, Virata and Drupada. I hope that Drishtadyumna and Draupadi will also hear a message I send through Sanjaya.”

All those addressed were present and many more, besides. Sanjaya went on, “I have known you since you were a boy, Yudhishtira and I know you will never walk the way of evil. You are the most honest and steadfast man on earth and you are born into a great house. You know that the noblest thing a man can do is to give up his life for the sake of his kin. Yudhishtira, I implore you, abandon the shameful thought that has entered your heart, of having war with your cousins. If you spill the blood that unites you, that sin will ruin your taintless dharma forever. It will be a stain upon your character that can never be erased. Yudhishtira, it seems you have decided to destroy the very world, as we know it! What matter, then, who wins or loses the war you want to fight?

I concede that you, your brothers and your allies might well prove stronger than my sons. Even if you succeed, how will you ever have peace of mind after killing your cousins? Just think, my child, however powerful the kshatriyas you have with you may be, the Kuru army is not a force you can trifle with. Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa, Aswatthama, Karna and a host of others, who are like Gods upon the earth, will face you in battle. Blood will flow, as we have not dreamt. Yudhishtira, by your dharma, isn't that a sin?

What good can come of this dreadful war? Win or lose, it will be the same. There are no victors in such a war, only the vanquished and the dead. The Pandavas have been righteous all these years; they have walked the path of truth unflinchingly. You must not ruin your fame with such a terrible crime. O Krishna, O Drupada, I pray you listen to me and advise Yudhishtira against the calamity he is plotting. I speak not just for the good of the House of Kuru, but of kshatriya kind, why, of the very earth.

Bheeshma and I both beg you, think only of peace!”

Surprisingly, now Yudhishtira lost his composure. He cried, “This is intolerable! My uncle is accusing me of wanting this war, of the enormous sin of wishing millions dead. Why does he speak as if I need to be persuaded to peace? Our messenger came to Hastinapura to offer peace. If I wanted war, I could have waged it thirteen years ago. The sons of Kunti have always walked the way of dharma and the world knows this.

Why does Dhritarashtra accuse me of being a warmonger, when it is to his own son he should look for the cause of the war that will be? Duryodhana’s heart is a dark fire; feed a fire and it wants more and more fuel. Perhaps my mistake was to feed it in the first place, with our exile. Now he wants more, because his greed is insatiable. He wants everything, all that is ours, as well.

As for my uncle, he is not innocent. Didn’t he stand with his son when the Pandavas were exiled? Did he raise his voice to stop the shame Panchali suffered in his sabha? Did Bheeshma, for that matter? No, Dhritarashtra does not care for me or mine, but now he is afraid. He sent us to Varanavrata and then gave us a wilderness in Khandavaprastha to be our patrimony. He is as guilty as Duryodhana.”

None of them had seen Yudhishtira like this before. Bheema and Draupadi had feared he might accept any beggarly terms Dhritarashtra offered, but they saw another Yudhishtira today. This was no longer the infinitely patient Yudhishtira of their exile; and he had not finished what he had to say.

“Our uncle Vidura was the only one who told Duryodhana the truth, that he was wrong. Vidura was the only friend we had and the Kauravas had. Even on the day of the dice, the most evil day of my life, Vidura warned them of the consequences of what Duryodhana was doing. Did Dhritarashtra listen to him then? Did Drona or Bheeshma?

When it comes to his son, Dhritarashtra is blind in not only his eyes, but also his spirit. No price is too high for him to pay to secure whatever Duryodhana wants, even if it is the suffering or the kingdom of his brother’s sons. And Duryodhana has no thought for dharma. He is wanton and selfish and his tongue is as vicious as his heart is evil. Does he give the elders of the most ancient sabha on earth the respect they deserve? No, he merely uses them for his convenience; and Dhritarashtra encourages him.

On the day of the dice, we heard Vidura beg Dhritarashtra to stop the game. But the king only asked, ‘Who won?’ I will never forget that. I saw the

excitement on his face. For once, he did not bother to hide his feelings behind his blind man's mask. At every throw he cried, 'Who won?' and I thought, who is more anxious to have my kingdom, the son or the father?

At least Duryodhana does not disguise his hatred for us with pretences or sweet words. With him, we know where we stand. But my uncle, whom we revered like our own father, his heart is darker than his son's. Yet, he is a coward and dare not show what he feels. Ah, this king is more devious than Shakuni. He is trying to say I am the one who wants war and he is for peace! On the day of the gambling, when I saw how Dhritarashtra refused to listen to what Vidura was saying, I knew the end of the House of Kuru was at hand."

His voice full of sorrow, Yudhishtira said, "Who are the law-makers in Hastinapura today? Who are they who wield influence, Sanjaya? Are they men of dharma, or are they the opposite: greedy, villainous men? Duryodhana is the real king in Hastinapura and we know what he is. Naturally, only those who are close to Duryodhana have real power in his city. And who are these? Shakuni, Dusasana and the sutaputra Karna! It is not hard to imagine the nature of the kingship and the course it is set on.

Sanjaya, Yudhishtira may be a man of dharma. He may follow the path of truth to the point where he appears foolish. But Yudhishtira is not entirely a fool. Even before you complete the message he sends, I know what Dhritarashtra wants. He wants to keep the whole kingdom. I say to you, good messenger, go back to Hastinapura and tell your king that Yudhishtira does not want war. But if he isn't given back what is his by right, half the Kuru kingdom, there will be war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas."

Sanjaya said quickly, "My lord, you haven't heard all of the message I bring. The king says to you, 'Man's life is brief, Yudhishtira. Why let it end in shame? Why allow yourself to be remembered as the Kuru who spilt the blood of his own kinsmen? Don't lead your life into this war; that will be the end of you, regardless of whether you win or lose.

I fear the Kauravas will not give up their kingdom now; they have ruled it for thirteen years in your absence. What does an earthly kingdom count for anyway, Yudhishtira? For a man of dharma like you, it would be better to live on the kindness of the Vrishnis and Andhakas, than fight this war against your own blood. The first course would establish you as the noblest man who ever lived and assure you immortal fame.

Yes, this human life is a short one and full of sin, suffering and sorrow. Dharma is more important than wealth or possessions. Only honor is permanent

in this unstable world. The desire for material possessions is what steals a man's judgement from him. A man like you, a seeker after truth, should burn every vestige of desire from his heart. The longing for wealth and power is a shackle on the spirit, an obstacle on the path to Salvation. Few men can renounce it. You are one of the few, Yudhishtira, prince of dharma!

I have heard about all the time you spent in the company of the rishis of the forest. Have you learnt something from them, nephew? Haven't you learnt, as I can tell you being an old man today, that wealth counts for nothing in life? It is only a burden to the soul. Honor and freedom mean everything. Be free of the desire for kingdom and wealth, Yudhishtira. Think of dharma, which is wealth in the next world. Even if you do win the terrible war you plan, what will you achieve? You will have to atone for the sin of having killed your kinsmen. Guilt is all you will gain for yourself. How will you enjoy a kingdom won by spilling your cousins' blood?

I say to you, again, as one who has lived longer than you have: life is shorter than you think. It is full of grief and sickness and it ends quickly in death. You may win back your kingdom; you may perform the Aswamedha and the Rajasuya yagnas. But when you die and that will be all too soon, my son, this dark deed of yours will cover your glory with shame and sin.

Thirteen years ago, you suffered what you now perceive as an injustice. Why didn't you fight my sons then? Krishna, Balarama, Drupada, the Kekayas and Satyaki were all with you. Your friends and your brothers begged you to declare war. But you would not; you were stubborn and steadfast. Now, suddenly, after thirteen years, you decide to fight. Why, Yudhishtira? You have been patient for so long. If you continue to be patient until you die, the world will remember you as a saint.

Anger is a demon that cripples the mind. Munis say that a man who swallows his anger comes to peace. What will you get, even if you can kill Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa, Shalya, Duryodhana, his brothers and Karna? What will your final reward be? This vast earth bounded by the sea? But you will not escape old age and death. Once you have actually killed those you now set out to kill, you will mourn them. You will bitterly regret what you have done. Heed what I say, Yudhishtira my son. One must never betray one's own nature. I know your nature, you are a gentle man.

My last word to you is, give up your anger. Forget everything that happened and return to the forest. Spend the rest of your life in quest of nirvana and win undying fame and joy for yourself. Or else, live with Krishna in Dwaraka; live

off the alms of the Vrishnis, they will see to your every need and comfort. You have walked the high road of dharma for so long, why leave it now for the alleyways of sin? I beg you, forget the bloodshed you are planning. Live in peace.'

So said my king Dhritarashtra to you," said Sanjaya in Upaplavya. Having delivered his message in full, he sat down and was silent, waiting for Yudhishtira's response.

SIX

THE PANDAVAS' REPLY

At first, Dhritarashtra's message stunned the sabha of kings in Upaplavya and no one spoke. For a moment, it even seemed the Pandavas were the ones who wanted war and a festival of bloodshed; while, the blind king in Hastinapura and his sons were men of dharma, praying for peace. Then the cold evil of the whole thing struck that court.

Bheema jumped up and, his eyes turning crimson, began to pace the floor like a great tiger, growling from time to time. Sahadeva's face was dark, his chest heaved as if his rage would erupt from him in fire. Arjuna, his mouth a grim line, glanced at Krishna. Krishna read his impulse clearly: to stop this negotiation with evil, to ride to Hastinapura and burn its malignant king.

Drupada sat stricken, hardly able to believe what he heard. Draupadi trembled where she sat. For a moment, perfect silence held the sabha. Yudhishtira also was too shocked to speak. He had not dreamt his uncle would go to this insane extent. The Pandava's mind flashed back to all the years when he had obeyed Dhritarashtra implicitly, loved him like a father, trusted him absolutely. Coldness gripped his heart; he felt invisible hands were strangling him.

Then he realized that his brothers and all the kings were waiting for him to answer Dhritarashtra. Panic swept over Pandu's son; for the thing that held him in a vice would not allow him to breathe, let alone speak. At that moment, he turned to Krishna. In the Dark One's eyes he saw complete understanding of what he felt and a wave of relief flooded him. At Krishna's look, the evil that seized Yudhishtira faltered and released him.

His heart still pounding, but fury driving fear from his body, the Pandava found the courage to speak. In a steady voice, he said warningly, "Sanjaya, you are only a messenger so I will not show you my anger. But from now, be careful what you say in this sabha. Don't forget I am not a brahmana, but a kshatriya. Perhaps, Dhritarashtra believes some of what he accuses me of, before all these, my dearest ones on earth. It is not my place to answer an elder in an open sabha. It is his privilege to believe whatever he wants and my dharma to keep what I think to myself.

As for the reply, which my uncle obviously expects from me, I leave that to

Krishna. He has heard everything you said. Let him decide if we should desist from war because of the message Dhritarashtra sends,” his voice sank, “or whether we should have war just because of his message. Whatever I have done so far has been with Krishna’s blessing. Today, I relinquish my will and my future to him. Let him decide what we must do, I will abide by his decision.”

Only the Dark One saw, in his clear heart, how more subtle pieces of fate fell in place for a bloody war. He had come to remove a burden of evil from the earth and his brilliant life had not been a peaceful one. But this final war between the forces of darkness and light would be an unprecedented purification. The war on the brink of the ages would shed more blood than any previous one and the grateful earth would be lighter by millions of arrogant lives. Then she could cross easily into the age to come, the diminished kali yuga, with no power left upon her that might dominate the coming night.

The true reasons for Krishna’s birth into the world at the age’s end were as mysterious as life itself, as inscrutable as he was. But he had come to cleanse the earth and the Kuru war was to be the climax of that ceremony. Knowing how inexorable destiny is, Krishna smiled to himself at these courtly messages and deliberations.

But in the council in Upaplavya, he said, “Sanjaya, I am moved that my cousin relinquishes his very fate to me, the welfare of the Pandavas is my first concern. Yet, I would also like Dhritarashtra’s sons to have long lives. Your king’s message is strange indeed. It seems to me, he seeks to blame Yudhishtira for Duryodhana’s crimes.

After the game of dice, we all urged Yudhishtira to take back with force what he had been deprived of by low deceit. But he said he was also to blame for what had happened and the path of dharma led surely through thirteen years of exile. Now the blind one in Hastinapura dares fault him for his rectitude, for his majestic patience. Sanjaya, a thief must be punished. Even a king who takes what is not his, is just a thief. To my mind, Yudhishtira should punish Duryodhana; it is his kshatriya dharma.

There will be no peace, as long as Duryodhana holds what rightfully belongs to Yudhishtira. I say, not only is Duryodhana a thief, but his father Dhritarashtra is also one. Didn’t he encourage his son to take what did not belong to him? Didn’t he enjoy the fruits of Duryodhana’s sin? Even now Dhritarashtra does not want to give back what is not his to keep: what he gave away, long ago, though it was only a desert then. And Dhritarashtra dares preach peace to Yudhishtira, who is an image of dharma on earth? I would laugh at his

temerity, were it not so heartless and so tragic.

I still say to you, Yudhishtira does not want this war. And neither do I. We do not wish to stain the earth with the blood of eleven aksauhinis, or even to kill Dhritarashtra's sons. Let them return Indraprastha to Yudhishtira and there will be no war. Only Yudhishtira's selfless nature makes this solution possible. A lesser man would have extracted terrible revenge for the shame he and his brothers and, most of all, Draupadi suffered in Hastinapura and for thirteen bitter years of exile. Can Duryodhana even imagine what these lords of the earth endured when they were deprived, in a day, of everything they had?"

This was not the genial Krishna, whom everyone knew and loved; it was another Krishna, grave and fearsome. He spoke softly, slowly and there was no laughter in him at all. "Yes, return to your king and tell him what I say to you now. Tell every man in that sabha Krishna said each one of them deserves to die for what they did to Panchali on the day of the game of dice. I except no one: not the elders, who sat by and watched what happened without stirring to stop it. All of them, save Vidura, deserve to die. Sanjaya, tell Karna that Arjuna has never forgotten what he said to Draupadi on that day. Tell him my cousin does not sleep at nights because he hears those words murmuring in his head, relentlessly.

Tell Dusasana, Bheema has not forgotten what he tried to do to the precious Panchali. Remind him of Bheema's oath. Tell Dusasana that Draupadi has not yet tied her hair; she is waiting to wash it in his blood before she does. Tell Duryodhana that, awake and asleep, Bheema sees the thigh on which he dared call Panchali to sit. Ah, Sanjaya, you know everything that happened. I am surprised that you bring this message to us from your king. Go back and tell them Sahadeva has not forgotten the oath he swore to kill Shakuni. Every day he thinks of the smile on Shakuni's face, when he told Yudhishtira across the dice-board, 'You still have Draupadi to wager.'

Every morning, at his prayers, Nakula renews his oath to kill Uluka. I need say no more. Dhrit-arashtra has not sent you here because he truly wants peace or to give up his greed, but only because he is afraid. We want peace not because we are afraid, but because we do not want to see kshatriya kind destroyed by the war; because Yudhishtira still cares for the lives not only of his brothers, but of his cousins. That is a great difference, Sanjaya. I know Yudhishtira; he does not want to make widows of the Kauravas' wives. But Duryodhana is full of darkness and obstinacy.

Go back to your king and say all this to him. Say I will come myself to Hastinapura, soon, to try to make them see reason. I do not think I will succeed,

but I will surely come and try. In the meanwhile, tell Dhritarashtra he did not choose his words wisely when he sent his message through you. He does Yudhishtira an injustice; and if Duryodhana does not relent, this foolish message will be answered with arrows.

There are two trees in this generation of the Kuru House. One is a sinister tree that grows in Hastinapura, a tree of evil. Its name is Duryodhana. Its trunk is Karna, its branches are Shakuni, its flower is Dusasana and its deep roots from where it truly springs, is your blind king, with his secretive heart: cowardly, dangerous, cold-blooded Dhritarashtra.

Look here, at the other Kuru tree, fair and lustrous: a tree of dharma and wisdom called Yudhishtira. Arjuna is its trunk, Bheema its branches, Nakula and Sahadeva are its fruit and flowers.” Krishna smiled suddenly, “And I am the root of this tree of light. A storm will sweep the earth, a savage storm of war. Think carefully, Sanjaya, which of these trees shall withstand that storm?

Go now, you have reply enough from us to take back to your king. Tell him everything we said to you. Say the Pandavas wish fervently for peace and peace there will be if Yudhishtira’s kingdom is returned to him. Otherwise, there will be war and the war will be the end of the Kauravas.”

Sanjaya said sadly, “Yudhishtira, the message I brought was not my own, nor does it express what I feel. I am only my king’s voice, when I come as his messenger. I have known you and your brothers since you were boys and you know how fond I am of you. You must not think harshly of me and you must not either, Krishna. I have always wished the sons of Pandu well and I still do. Now give me a message for the king.”

Yudhishtira had regained his composure. Gently he said, “I did not mean to hurt you, Sanjaya, but I was stung by my uncle’s message. You have always loved us as much as Vidura has and I am aware of it. You were there on the day of the game of dice and I know you warned the king against what he did. Good Sanjaya, a golden bowl does not change to a base metal because poison is poured into it.

As for the message I send back through you: wish them all well in Hastinapura; greet the elders for me and the others. Then tell Duryodhana I said to him, ‘Cousin, the only music in your heart is of your desires. Sometimes you must listen to other sweeter songs. We want peace with you, Duryodhana. You are a great king; give back what is mine and be a greater king than ever. Either return Indraprastha, or fight me. I pray you will listen to reason and there may be lasting peace between us.’

Give this message to my cousin, Sanjaya.”

Arjuna did not like the softness of his brother’s message. He rose and said in anger, “Indraprastha is like a bondwoman to Duryodhana, while Yudhishtira is her true master. Tell Duryodhana to release our city and our kingdom, or he will face the Pandavas in battle. We have Krishna, Satyaki, Drupada, Drishtadyumna and Shikhandi with us. Duryodhana made my brother sleep on a rough bed for twelve years. In return, we will make him sleep forever on a bloody field. Yudhishtira has kept his anger to himself, these long, hard years. If he unleashes it, his rage will consume Duryodhana and his army as fire does a dry forest in summer.

Yama wields a mace. Duryodhana will see Bheema wield his mace among the Kaurava host and I swear my brother’s wrath shall not be less than Death’s. Let Duryodhana remember the other sons of Pandu. Let him think of Abhimanyu, who is Arjuna’s son and Krishna’s nephew. Let him think well how he will stop my boy on the field of war. Abhimanyu will blow like a tempest at the Kauravas!”

It was rare, indeed, for the quiet Arjuna to say so much. Obviously, he was moved and they all listened to him in silence, because he was eloquent today.

“Remind Duryodhana we have the indomitable Drupada and Virata with us. Surely, he has not forgotten Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumna. Tell your king the fire-born Dhrishtadyumna shall be the Senapati of our legions. Tell Duryodhana again that Satyaki is with us. I am certain he has forgotten Satyaki’s valor, or he would not even dream of war.

More than any of these, remind my foolish cousin that Krishna will be my sarathy. Tell him, Sanjaya, that the Pandavas plan a yagna. Krishna will be the priest for our sacrifice, the song of the Gan-diva will be the sound of the Vedas and the havis, the burnt offering, will be the Kaurava host. Take my message back to our cousin.”

Arjuna sat down, red-eyed and Bheema, who stood some way off at the back of the court, cried, “Tell that fool what Arjuna says! Say Bheema says the same thing.”

When the sabha was quiet again, Yudhishtira said, “Sanjaya, you see how angry my brothers are. You must persuade Duryodhana to give me back my kingdom. I have no wish to be the occasion for this war. If everything else fails, I will accept just five towns to make peace. Let him give me Indraprastha, Vrikaprastha, Jayanta and Varanavrata. These hold memories for us. The fifth

town, why, let it be a village, can be of his choice.”

Bheema and Arjuna exchanged a glance at this madness and Krishna smiled. Yudhishtira went on, “This is my offer to show Duryodhana I do not want war. Let him give me these five towns and I will be content. How can I want my cousins dead? No, I want peace.”

Sanjaya bowed. He left the court in Upaplavya with tears in his eyes, that Yudhishtira should suffer as he did. Anxiety went with that good messenger, as he rode back to Hastinapura.

SEVEN

A BLIND KING'S TERROR

It was late in the evening, when Sanjaya arrived back in Dhritarashtra's palace. He was deeply troubled and decided to see the king straightaway. But he would deliver the message from Upaplavya only the next day, in court.

Sanjaya said to the guards, "I want to see the king if he is not asleep. Announce me to him."

Dhritarashtra had been waiting for his messenger's return. He took Sanjaya's hand and made him sit beside him. "What happened, Sanjaya? What did the Pandavas say?"

Sanjaya heaved a sigh. "Yudhishtira prostrates himself before you and asks after your health." Now he paused, as if hesitating to say what was on his mind.

"Is that all, Sanjaya? I can feel you have more to tell me."

"How I hated being your messenger on this vile mission! I felt at peace in Upaplavya. I felt I was in a pure and unsullied land again. Hastinapura rots at its very soul and though you are such an intelligent king, you choose to do nothing about it. I have known you for many years, my lord and this is not the time for me to lie to you, or say only what you want to hear.

How could you have been so cruel to your brother's sons? And having been so cruel, how can you dream you will escape retribution? Have you lost your reason, Dhritarashtra? You stand at the edge of a precipice and insist you must walk forward, you and your arrogant son. Listen to me, my lord, this is your last chance to turn back from the chasm. Everything you have done so far is adharma. You abandoned wisdom and encouraged your son to walk an evil path; and now you want to convince the Pandavas to give up the kingdom you yourself gave them. But Yudhishtira says you must return Indraprastha to him, or there will be war."

Dhritarashtra released his messenger's hand. Sanjaya said, "I have traveled a long way and I am tired. I want to rest now. I will deliver Yudhishtira's message in your sabha tomorrow."

Without waiting for his king's leave, Sanjaya rose and walked out. Dhritarashtra was left alone in the darkness. The blind king knew there would be no escape now. Slowly, he rose and crossed to his bed. He curled up on it, his

arms raised above his head, as if to ward off the punishment that must fall on him. Sleep would not come to Dhritarashtra, only visions of nemesis. In terror, he called his guard.

“Send for Vidura, I must see him at once.”

Woken from sleep, Vidura came immediately. Dhritarashtra was shaking. The king clasped his brother’s hand tightly and led him to a couch. He said in a voice full of fear, “Sanjaya has come back from Upaplavya. He spoke roughly to me, Vidura and went away without giving me Yudhishtira’s message. But he said the Pandavas will have war with us if their kingdom is not returned. Sanjaya was harsher than I have ever known him to be.

I cannot sleep Vidura. Stay with me, I am afraid. I have no one except you. You are the only one who loves me as I am, with all my faults. Help me sleep my brother. I must sleep, I must.”

Vidura withdrew his hand. He said, “I have heard there are five kinds of men who cannot sleep. A man who lusts after another man’s wife, a thief, a man who has lost his wealth, a failure and a weak man threatened by a strong one. I hope you are none of these men, my lord. You are not a greedy man are you, Dhritarashtra?”

The king repeated dully, “Help me find sleep, Vidura, I must sleep.”

Vidura looked at his half-brother pityingly. “It is nothing new, my lord. You haven’t been able to sleep for years now. Why, you have not slept since the rishis of Satasinga brought Pandu’s sons to Hastinapura. Perhaps you could not sleep even before that, though you told no one of it. I remember the night Duryodhana was born. You called me and said, ‘I hear Pandu already has a son. Which of them shall sit on the throne, my boy or his?’

No, Dhritarashtra, your insomnia and your jealousy are not new. Your heart is full of evil and your nephews have suffered because of you. The root of the sin that will destroy your own sons lies in you. There is no escaping that. You tell me you cannot sleep; how can someone like you sleep? Yudhishtira loved and honored you. He obeyed you as if you were his father and you repaid his love with treachery. And now, you want me to tell you how you can sleep.”

Vidura paused. He rose and paced the room while his brother followed his movements with his unseeing face. Taking his time, Vidura came back and said more softly than ever, “Do you want to sleep, my lord? I will tell you the only way you can sleep.”

The king grasped his brother’s hand again. He whispered, “Tell me, Vidura!

You still love me.”

“If only you were a wise king and a master of your greed, my lord! You would know yourself what you should do, just as you would have known what you should not do. Do you want to sleep my brother? Give Yudhishtira’s kingdom back to him and you will sleep like a baby.”

Dhritarashtra stiffened, he let go Vidura’s hand. His face worked in anguish, then, he said, “Vidura, tell me about a wise man and a foolish one. What are their qualities?”

Vidura sighed. This was an old ploy of his brother’s: to skirt round and round an issue, never facing it. Vidura said, “A wise man aspires not for riches or kingdom, but the higher things of life, for the evolution and Salvation of his soul. He knows himself. His virtue is steady; he is diligent and hard working, patient and understanding. Not anger, joy, pride or grief can distract him from his purpose. He acts and always thinks he serves not merely this world, but the next one as well. Desire does not taint what he does. Honest deeds delight him and he is indifferent to slight or acclaim. He is as serene as a lake along the Ganga.”

Vidura waited and Dhritarashtra whispered, “And the fool?”

“The scriptures are a book he never opens. He is vain, thinking himself the wisest of all, when truly he knows little. The fool must have what he wants and does not hesitate to use evil means to acquire it, though they destroy him. He is envious and covetous.”

Vidura paused again and his eyes glowed in the dimness of that chamber. Slowly, he continued, “And I will tell you a strange thing about sin, my lord. One man commits a sin and a hundred others enjoy its brief fruits. But in the end, when the time of reckoning comes, it is only the first man who pays.”

Perhaps Vidura still clutched at straws, hoping wildly that he could frighten his brother into giving back the Pandavas their kingdom. “A wise king should be discriminating, or he brings ruin not only upon himself and his family, but the earth. He must know right from wrong. He must constantly strive to walk the way of dharma. It is his daily struggle, from which he shall have no respite. How can he be a master of the world, if he cannot first master himself? A wise king must know who his friends are and who are his enemies.

Poison or an arrow will kill one man, but evil counsel will destroy a kingdom. Dharma is the highest good; the supreme peace is forgiveness. In the knowledge of truth lies the only stability and contentment and joy only in benevolence. It is not hard for a king to be great. He need but refrain from harsh

speech and ignore those who give him evil counsel.

You know what the mortal sins are. Theft of another man's property, lying with another man's wife and disloyalty to friends. Lust, anger and greed destroy the soul. A wise king always gives sanctuary to those who come to him in need; equally, he avoids those who are of small sense and near-sighted. He avoids men who procrastinate, men who flatter him and those that are lazy."

Vidura paused. "Would you hear more from me, my lord? Or do my words hurt you?"

Dhritarashtra said, "Don't stop, Vidura. I grow strangely calm listening to you. Your words are like fire, yet they soothe me. Don't stop, go on."

"Five are those that a man must worship: his father, his mother, the fire, his guru and his soul. A king should cling to truth, charity, benevolence, forgiveness and patience, as if for his life. His high birth, his wisdom, restraint, learning, prowess, moderation, gifts and gratitude give glory to a king. The body is a house of nine doors, three pillars and five witnesses. The soul sits over them all.

The wise king knows there are ten kinds of men, who have no knowledge of what virtue is. The drunk, the inattentive man, the man who raves, the tired man, the angry one, the starving one, the despondent one, the covetous one, the frightened and the lustful one.

He who does not grieve when calamity strikes him, he who has controlled his senses: he is the best of all men, no other. He who bears no malice to anyone, who does not speak arrogantly, who is forgiving; he is the noblest man.

The good king does not tax his people more than they can bear. The bee that sips honey never takes so much that he destroys the flower. The gardener plucks flowers, but he does not uproot his plants. A wise man gleans goodness from whomever he can, from every side and the whole world is his school. He preserves his virtue by honesty, his learning by application and his beauty by purifying his body. He preserves his high lineage by living a life of faultless character. A well-born man, whose character is loose, can never command respect.

And a king who suffers from envy, whether it is envy of another's wealth, beauty, power, lineage, joy, fortune or honor, suffers from an incurable disease. A man must know how to behave himself and the man who is drunk with wealth is more dangerously intoxicated than the one who is drunk with wine. He who is drunk with prosperity will only come to his senses after a fall.

Dhritarashtra, even as the moon waxes during the bright fortnight so do the

calamities of the man who is a servant to his senses. The foolish king wants to subdue his court before subduing himself. He wants to subdue his enemy before his court; only failure and death await him. But the king who first conquers himself shall conquer the earth. For the hardest battle is against oneself and the finest victory.

This body is the vehicle, the chariot, the sarathy is the soul within and the senses are the horses yoked. When the senses are restrained, like horses well trained and obedient, the chariot goes safely and pleasantly through life. But if the horses are not properly broken and the charioteer is not skilled, you can imagine the fate of the chariot. Lust and greed have plunged many a king into ruin.

The sages say that for a man to control his own tongue is the hardest thing. Pure speech, full of meaning, can save the very world; just as evil talk can bring doom. They say that a forest cut down with axes can grow again. But the heart wounded with cruel words may never recover. Arrows you can pull out of the flesh, but a word that pierces the heart: who will ever fetch it out? The savage words a man speaks defile him. The wise man never causes injury by speaking harshly; he knows how grievous this is.

He whom the Gods want to destroy, they first make foolish. When the light of the intellect is dimmed, evil begins to seem like dharma and that man's end is near."

Dhritarashtra leaned back. His body swayed as he listened raptly to his brother. Vidura went on, "Bathing in the tirthas and compassion to all beings, these are said to be equal in punya. Many say that living compassion is the greater sacrament. For as long as a man's kindness is extolled in this world, he has glory in heaven.

The Gods do not protect us with weapons. Those whom they wish success, they bless with intelligence. The intelligent man knows what dharma is; only he who is righteous is wise, for there is no other cleverness in this world. Reciting the Vedas does not save a deceitful man. As fire does gold, a man's birth is tested by his character, his honesty by his conduct and his courage in a time of panic. Poverty tests a man's self-control and his friends are tested in times of danger and adversity.

Eight are the paths of dharma: sacrifice, study, asceticism, charity, truth, mercy, forgiveness and contentment. The first four may exist from vanity; the last four are found only in the truly great man. When you act during the day, think of the night, which will surely come. Do nothing by the sun that will rob

you of sleep or visit you with nightmares, when darkness falls. Let your youth be as the day; use it to make your old age calm and joyful. Let your whole life be as a bright day, live it so your hereafter is blessed.

Those dark knots in your heart, Dhritarashtra, undo them with serenity. Quiet your passions; observe true dharma. Look upon both the pleasant and the unpleasant as your own self. Be silent if someone slanders you. It is not the one who is slandered who is destroyed, but the slanderer himself. And if the slanderer has any virtues, they find a home in the man he sought to slander.

Never fall out with your true friends, O king, though they do not say what you want to hear. Avoid flatterers, they are cunning and base. Do not desert your nobility and never be arrogant; arrogance is what causes a man to fall. Let anger never master you so you speak harshly. Cruel words are the most terrible weapons. They scorch the very entrails, the bones and the marrow of men.

Silence is holier than speech. If you must speak, speak the truth and speak it agreeably.

Not just birth makes a noble man, but asceticism, restraint, knowledge, sacrifice, a pure marriage and charity. Men die and are born again; and again, they ripen and wither. Often, they stop their career through endless time and ask, 'Who am I, where am I going?' Often grief strikes them along the long way. Joy comes, as well, in its turn, as do all the opposites of life: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, plenitude and penury. The wise man does not grieve when he is unfortunate, nor does he exult when fortune smiles on him. His equanimity is founded in his wisdom, his soul, in God his refuge and in dharma. He rises above the opposites; he is free.

Excess kills men: the excess of pride, of speech, in eating, anger and desire.

Kings, my lord, are meant to have strength of five sorts. Of these, the strength of arms is the least. The king who has good advisors is strong, as is he who has wealth and a noble birth, which confers the strength of his sires. But the primal strength, by which the rest are acquired, is of the intellect, of the spirit.

The man for whom the clod of earth and the bar of gold have the same value, who is above joy and sorrow, who is withdrawn from the world, he is the true yogi. If prosperity is a flame, its fuels are seven: intelligence, tranquillity, restraint, purity, sweet speech and kindness to friends. Pleasure and pain are evanescent, but virtue lasts forever. Birth, death and the phases of life are transitory, but beyond these is the truth, which never changes or fades. Yoke yourself to that truth; and you shall find peace.

Kings of awesome power and wealth have ruled this earth, since the eldest days. Which of them escaped death? What wealth, power or enjoyment did they take with them to the next world? Nothing except their good deeds and their sins; and others enjoyed what once belonged to these kings, while fire consumed their bodies. Not their sons, friends or wives followed them into the next world, only their karma. Men should be careful, most of all, of what they do.

The rishis have likened life to a river and the soul, as well. The waters of the river of life are the senses; lust and rage are its crocodiles. Let restraint be the raft on which you cross over the waves of births and rebirths, to the shore of Salvation.

As for the soul's river, virtue is its holy ablution, purifying it; truth is the water of virtue, self-control and relinquishment are its banks and compassion its currents. The man of dharma purifies himself in this river, washing away his desires; because the atman, the soul, is sacred."

The night was alive with gentle Vidura's wisdom. Visibly moved, Dhritarashtra said in a hush, "Vidura, tell me more of the atman. Tell me how, with this body, I can still meet the Eternal One. Tell me about death."

Vidura said, "I am born a sudra, my lord. My knowledge is limited by my birth and I may not say more about these profound things. Yet, if you truly want answers, there is someone I can summon who will enlighten you."

"Someone in Hastinapura?"

Vidura laughed softly. "No, my lord, someone from another world. Sanat-sujata, a mukta, a liberated muni."

"You can summon him?"

"With bhakti all things are possible."

Dhritarashtra pursed his lips; he breathed, "Call the holy one; tonight, I would be enlightened."

Vidura sat on the floor in the posture of the lotus. He shut his eyes and spoke a quiet mantra. In a moment, the room filled with an exceptional light. Dhritarashtra could not see it, but he felt its subtle vibration. The light grew blinding, at its heart a tall figure materialized, whose white hair flowed down to his shoulders, whose eyes were pools of lambency.

Vidura prostrated himself at the apparition's feet. Dhritarashtra was also intensely aware of his presence. The king rose and, helped by Vidura, knelt before Sanat-sujata. The rishi laid his hands on their heads, blessing them.

Vidura said, “Swami, Dhritarashtra wanted to know about death and I could not answer him.”

The rishi asked, “What do you want to know, O king?”

“My lord, I have heard that the rishis say there is no death. Yet, even the Devas and Asuras take vows of celibacy to keep death away.”

“The wisest ones, who are truly free, say death is only ignorance. They say that where there is no ignorance, there is no death either. Death is not a beast that devours men. If a man’s heart is clear, death will not approach him. If desire and anger do not sway a man, he does not die. Death is a form of ignorance. If a man kills desire at its first stirring, he need not fear death. Death is a materialization of the wrath and greed that possess an embodied soul. The man of wisdom will not meet this demon.

Even as the body is destroyed when it dies, death itself is destroyed when faced with the light of knowledge.”

Dhritarashtra said, “What is the aim of tapasya, of mowna? How does one attain to mowna?”

“With quietude you reach the Brahman that is beyond language and its trammels. True mowna is the quiescence not only of speech, but of the senses and the mind. It is the consciousness of the Absolute. AUM is the Brahman: the gross, the subtle and the original. Mowna is when a soul gradually merges the gross in the subtle; and the subtle in the causal. And beyond the Bindu of the AUM, is the immaculate Brahman, eternal, unchanging.

Brahman is the ultimate attainment, after which there is no other. Brahman cannot be attained in a day, or a life, but through many, many lifetimes. Brahman cannot be attained without brahma-charya. By continence, a man becomes like a child, pure and free of passion. He triumphs over death. By good deeds, men attain only to the transient realms of Devaloka. When the punya of his deeds is exhausted, the man is born again into the mortal world. But the punya of ultimate knowledge is imperishable; with this, a man attains the everlasting Brahman.”

Dhritarashtra said, “They say that a wise man finds the Brahman in his own soul. What is the Brahman like, what is its color, its form?”

“Not on earth, or in the sky, not in the waters of the ocean is there anything like it. Not among the fathomless stars, in lightning, the clouds, or rain: nowhere is its form seen. You cannot see it in the akasa, not among the Devas, not in the sun or the moon. Not in the Rik, among the Yajus, the Athar-vas or, even, in the

taintless Sama will you find it.

It cannot be fathomed, or known with the intellect. Why, even the cosmic Destroyer is destroyed by it, after the dissolution. It is smaller than atoms, invisible. It is everywhere and the basis of everything that exists. It is changeless, actless; yet, it is also all this visible, tangible universe. It is vast; it is full of bliss. All beings spring from it and to it they return. It is not twain, yet it is manifest as the universe. It is immanent, pervasive. Those who know say it never changes, but only the languages that describe it.

Ah, those who know That in which the universe is established, they are blessed indeed!" said Sanat-sujata. With a smile, the sage added, "So renounce your greed, O king. Follow the straight path of dharma and knowledge and freedom shall be yours."

His palm raised in blessing over the brothers, the enlightened one vanished from Dhritarashtra's chamber.

EIGHT

SANJAYA DELIVERS A MESSAGE

The next morning, the Kauravas filed into the court of Hastinapura. Bheeshma and Dhritarashtra entered first and sat on their thrones. The blind king was haggard after the long night, already defeated before the first arrow was loosed or the first blade drew blood. When all the others were in their places, Sanjaya came in. The sabha settled quickly and Dhritarashtra asked, “Sanjaya, what message do you bring from my nephews in Upaplavya?”

Sanjaya rose, “Yudhishtira sends his greetings to you all. Listen to what transpired in the sabha into which I took your message. Hear what Krishna said and what Yudhishtira and Arjuna said after him.”

Sanjaya had been sent as a messenger also for a special gift he had: his prodigious memory. He launched into a vivid description of the council in Upaplavya and he remembered details that no other man would have. He described the clothes the different kings wore and, even, who was grim or who smiled and when. Not a word had he forgotten, not an inflection of tone or a flicker of expression in a speaker’s eye. The sabha in Hastinapura sat riveted while he spoke.

Sanjaya was fierce, when he came to what Arjuna said. ““Tell Dhritarashtra’s son if he does not give up half the kingdom, he will see Bheema hunt his soldiers like Yama. Tell the foul-tongued suta-putra that he will die, when I meet him again on the battlefield. Tell him I cannot wait to cut his arrogant life short. Tell Duryodhana he will repent when he sees Satyaki take the field against him. Tell him Krishna will be my sarathy and no Kaurava will escape death.”“

Sanjaya concluded, “And Yudhishtira said finally that if Duryodhana will not give him back his kingdom, let him give just five towns. Let him return Indraprastha, Vrikaprastha, Jayanta, Varanavrata and any other village of his choice and Yudhishtira will disband his legions.”

Having finished, Sanjaya sat down amidst silence in that sabha. No one spoke for a time, then Bheeshma said in his deep, slow way, “Ah Duryodhana, are you intent on courting death? Don’t you see whom you have chosen to be your enemies? Arjuna and Krishna. The rishis all say they are Nara Narayana of old come to wash the earth in blood. They are invincible, my son. Listen to an

old man; give up your obstinacy. Give back their kingdom to the Pandavas and be grateful that they won't seek revenge."

Duryodhana sat stiffly in his place, not a muscle moving. Bheeshma looked at his favorite grandson, with untold tenderness and anxiety in his old eyes. And he spoke not because he thought there was any hope of Duryodhana doing as he asked, but he felt it was his sacred duty to say, again, what was obvious.

The Pitama resumed, "They have dharma with them and if that is not enough, they have Krishna as well. Duryodhana, you will decide if there will be war. All the rest, Dhritarashtra, Dusasana, Karna, even Shakuni, will do as you say. I beg you, my child, even now it is not too late: return their kingdom to your cousins and let us have peace."

Duryodhana was impassive. In despair, his grandsire cried, "Do you hope the vile, scheming Shakuni will win the war for you? Or your brother Dusasana, steeped in every vice known to man? No, you rely on Karna. How blind can you be? You hope a sutaputra can win a war against the noblest kshatriyas in the world. Have you forgotten he was cursed by his own guru for lying to him? How will he turn away Bhargava's curse? And the brahmana on the seashore, whose cow he killed, cursed him. Your friend has already set himself on a course to death. Must you follow him, Duryodhana?"

Or haven't you heard that he has given away his kavacha and kundala to Indra? Without them, how will he stand before Indra's son in battle? Duryodhana, as I love you, listen to me. You cannot win this war."

Karna sprang to feet and cried, "Bheeshma, you cannot speak to me like this whenever you care to! Have I been disloyal to Duryodhana that you rebuke me? I may not be born one, but I am more of a kshatriya than most of you. My birth is not as important as my loyalty. And for you, Duryodhana, I will kill all the Pandavas by myself!"

Bheeshma would not deign to address Karna directly. He turned to Dhritarashtra and said, "For so many years, I have been listening to this fool bragging about how he will kill the Pandavas single-handedly. Yet, so far, it has only been great words, never deeds. Dhritarashtra, the sutaputra is not a sixteenth part the archer Arjuna is and I lay the blame squarely on him for the plight we are in today. He incited Duryodhana to humiliate the Pandavas in this sabha.

Duryodhana, depending on this braggart, you made enemies of your mighty cousins. What could Karna do against the gandharva in Dwaitavana? What did

he do against Arjuna in Virata, even when we were all with him? Both times he was routed and he fled. But I see reproach in your eyes because I censure your friend. I feel so sorry for you, my child, but I fear you are past my help.”

Before his Pitama had finished, Duryodhana insultingly turned his face away from the patriarch; and that was always his way with anyone who said a word against Karna. The love between Duryodhana and Karna was not something that Bheeshma or anyone in Hastinapura understood. It was a thing of the soul, much like the love between Krishna and Arjuna: a sacred covenant, a relationship that transcended every other.

Lately, there was a lot of ill will against Karna in the Kuru sabha. The elders felt the suta’s son wielded too much influence in the kingdom. Bheeshma was the only one who spoke out openly against him. Duryodhana drifted farther and farther from his grandfather, assuming a remote, barely civil formality toward the old man who loved him so dearly.

Except for Duryodhana and his brothers, hardly anyone in Hastinapura cared for Karna. Dhritarashtra was careful to keep on his right side, but only because the king did not want to estrange his son. As for the rest, they disliked the brash sutaputra and resented the power he had. But they dare not cross him, for fear; and if anyone slighted Karna, it seemed that Duryodhana’s love for him only grew. He was as protective as a mother. Duryodhana felt the anguish Karna endured set him not only apart from, but also above the rest of mankind. He saw Karna as a suffering God. If there was anyone Duryodhana loved as dearly as he did himself, it was his brilliant, tormented friend.

An abrasive silence or an eyebrow sardonically arched were weapons the Kaurava used to effect. Now, with a sneer, he turned his face away from Bheeshma, as if everything the patriarch said was nonsense.

Drona rose to speak. “What Bheeshma says is true. The messages Krishna and Arjuna sent are not empty threats. If they say they will kill the Kauravas, they do not speak for the pleasure of hearing themselves brag. Arjuna is my shishya, I know what an archer he is. Then he was only a boy; now he is a man and a master of the devastras. He has Siva’s Paasupata. When I am told there is no kshatriya on earth like him, I believe what I hear.

The first lesson any warrior must learn is never to underestimate his enemy; there is nothing more foolish. Yet, this sabha is doing just that. Duryodhana, Karna, you are like children that have no notion of who they are going to war against. Make peace with the Pandavas. If there is a war, I, Drona, tell you that you will not win.”

Dhritarashtra grew more restive than ever. When nobody else spoke after Drona sat down, the king turned his face toward Sanjaya and said, “Sanjaya, tell us about the army the Pandavas have gathered in Upaplavya.”

Sanjaya rose again and he let his mind wander back to the force he had seen outside that city. Suddenly, with eerie intensity, he saw multitudinous legions around him. He felt he was back in Upa-plavya. He heard the awesome noise of a million voices speaking at once. He saw the glitter of weapons, the gleam of mail. He smelt the living bodies of a million fierce men. He saw the grim faces of the kshatriyas who led them. All this swept over Sanjaya in a moment and as if fate laid its hand on him, his eyes rolled up and he fainted.

A commotion broke out. Some courtiers sprang forward to revive the sarathy and the king asked in alarm, “What happened? Why doesn’t Sanjaya speak?”

Bheeshma said dryly, “He swooned at the memory of the Pandava army.”

Dhritarashtra’s hands were cold again. Sanjaya was revived with sharp salts and as he began to describe the army at Upaplavya in a low, clear voice, Dhritarashtra’s terror grew.

“My lord, besides the Pandavas and Satyaki, Virata will fight against us; and with them, Drupada, Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumna, Yuyudhana, Jarasandha’s son Jayatsena, Dhrishtaketu, the Chedi king and many others as unconquerable. Their armies teem with kshatriyas whose names I do not know. But I saw them and they are hardly less formidable than their kings.”

Dhritarashtra whispered, “Listening to you, Sanjaya, I fear for my sons’ lives. And more than any of the kshatriyas you have named, I fear Bheema! I see him at nights, red-eyed and terrible. I hear the oath he swore that he would kill Duryodhana and Dusasana. I feel certain that, truly like Yama himself, he will raze our army and kill all my sons. Ah, Duryodhana, I see you with your thigh broken, dying slowly, in agony. Dusasana, my child, I see you with your chest torn open by Vayu’s son and his lips stained with your blood.

I see Bheema sweep over our legions like a scarlet Ganga in spate. I am blind, I know, but I see all this with ghastly clarity, even as sighted men see the world. Listen to me, my sons, I have never spoken to you like this before. I don’t sleep at night, but lie awake watching these visions of death. I see Yudhishtira’s angry eyes turned to glare at my children. They are terrible eyes, Duryodhana and I cry out when he looks at me.

Oh, my friends, I am helpless; my son will not listen to me. He has sinned,

but it is not too late to turn back from his sin. If only he would relent.”

Unexpectedly Sanjaya cried, “My lord, it is you who are to blame not Duryodhana! The sin is yours. For years, Vidura tried to bring you back to dharma. Tirelessly, he sought to show you the way to light. But you were greedy and envious, my lord, you would never listen to him.

I was in this sabha when the game of dice was played. How much Vidura begged you to stop it. Did you listen? Your ears were keened to the roll of the ivory dice and you would turn to me to whisper, ‘Who won? Who won?’ My lord, a father is the best friend a man can have in this life. You have denied your son the fortune of having a wise father’s advice and firmness, when he most needed it. You were not a wise father, but a selfish one. You thought only of your own material benefit, not of the harm you were doing to your son’s character. Dhritarashtra, you led your boy to his ruin.

You were the king. A word from you would have been enough: you could have stopped the game of dice. Your brother Pandu served you loyally when he was alive. His conquests make up most of this kingdom. But when his sons came home to Hastinapura, you did not treat them justly. This kingdom and this city rightfully belong to Yudhishtira, but you gave him a desert. And he made it bloom. Then your son took that away from his cousin, as well, with deceit.

When the Pandavas were banished, you felt no grief for them, Dhritarashtra, but only fear because they left swearing revenge. Do you remember you called me that day, my lord?”

The king had nothing to say. Sanjaya went on, relentlessly, “And I say to you today, O king, the sons of Pandu shall fulfil their oaths. They will kill your sons. And your princes will die not so much for their sins, as for yours, Dhritarashtra; that you did not stop them when you should have, but, instead, abetted their folly from your own avarice.

At least Duryodhana has those that love him in this world; for his sake, eleven aksauhinis have come to Hastinapura. All these kshatriyas are ready to die for him. They have not come for you, Dhritarashtra, or for the Kurus, but for your son. This prince would have been an emperor in his own right, except that you led him down an evil path. Once I thought you were more clear-sighted than men that saw the world with their eyes; you have proved you are truly blind.

My lord, your sons will die on the battlefield, but they will not die cowards. They will die such deaths that the world will remember them. All their sins shall be forgiven and they will find the heaven meant for kshatriyas killed in battle.

Duryodhana's selfishness will be forgiven, because he will die a resplendent death at Bheema's hands. And this Karna, this most generous man on earth, will die for his Duryodhana. What greater gift is there than to give one's life for one's friend? He will be remembered as the noblest of men. But you, my poor lord, will find no such release. You will outlive all your sons in dreadful grief. You will live to see ruin, to gaze into the face of doom. And then you will curse yourself that you did not relent earlier and prevent this war. You will not escape retribution, Dhritarashtra, there is no Salvation for you.

Dhritarashtra had turned pale on his throne. His lips worked feverishly and he could not hide the terror he felt. Now and then, a moan would escape him, as he sat huddled within his blindness; but he was so transparent and pathetic today.

NINE

‘NOT LAND TO COVER THE POINT OF A NEEDLE’

Duryodhana saw his father terrified and he rose in sorrow. “Why are you so afraid, my lord? The news Sanjaya brings about the Pandava army is nothing new to me. I am aware they have a vast and powerful host. But our cousins have been in exile for thirteen years, while we have prepared for this war. Father, do you think me a fool that I am not aware of what we are going into?”

No, I remember my own anxiety of thirteen years ago, when dark Krishna, Satyaki, Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna went to meet Yudhishtira in the Kamyaka vana. They had mustered an army for him. They saw the Pandavas wearing deerskin and tree-bark and they told Yudhishtira to march on Hastinapura straightaway and take back his kingdom. If he had listened to them, we would have been finished. For then, all the kings of the earth were against us; only this loyal Karna was on my side.

I heard an army had gathered near the Kamyaka aranya and I was afraid. I went to Acharya Drona and I said, ‘What will we do if they attack us now?’

Drona said, ‘Don’t be afraid, Duryodhana. Any one of us, Bheeshma, Kripa or I, can defeat them. When he took the princesses of Kasi, your Pitama vanquished an army by himself. With Bheeshma on your side, you need never fear.’

My lord, even when the Pandavas had all the kings of Bharatavarsha with them and we had none, Drona said we would beat them. Today I have more friends than they do and I have nurtured my friendships. Our cousins have been in the wilderness for thirteen years and they have been all but forgotten. They are like some dim memory now, their power barely real any more. If they have seven aksauhinis, I command eleven. Moreover, most of those who will fight for them are their own blood: which is seldom any guarantee for having the best warriors.”

He paused and his lip curled. “As for Bheema, father, I am the better mace-fighter. I have spent hours, every day, perfecting my skills. Even when we were students, our guru Balarama would always say, ‘Duryodhana is my best sishya. He is my equal, none of you others can touch him.’ Bheema knows I am better than he is and so do Krishna and Arjuna.

As with everything else, my cousin is a crude mace-fighter. He has brute strength but few finer skills. I long to meet him on the field! I have loathed Bheema since we were boys. He always thought he and his brothers were superior to everyone else. I look forward to the moment when we come face to face and I smash his soft head like a melon. After Bheema is dead, even I will be able to kill Arjuna. The Pandavas' spirit will break and we will rip through them."

As he spoke, Duryodhana paced the sabha like a lion in his prime. Honor and morale were at stake here; this was as crucial a moment as the hour of battle. It was here, in this sabha, that he would win the hearts of his own kshatriyas; here that he would exorcise the specter of fear that Sanjaya, Drona and Bheeshma had raised among the Kurus. Hearing his son so assured, Dhritarashtra stopped trembling.

Duryodhana had not finished. "And then how can you be afraid, when you think of our own army? Only a coward would predict defeat for us after he has seen my legions."

The Kaurava's voice rose, "My lord, Bheeshma is with me! Bheeshma of the awesome vow, Bheeshma of the boon that death will come to him only when he summons it. Is Bheeshma just any man, that these Pandavas dare challenge us? He, by himself, can raze our cousins and their army. But we also have Drona! Was Drona born like an ordinary man? He is the Acharya of us all and he fights on our side. No sishya is greater than his guru, not even Arjuna.

Shall Aswatthama, born by Siva's grace, whom many say is an amsa of the Lord, be conquered in battle? Can Acharya Kripa be defeated? No! These men could oppose the legions of Devaloka. Yet, even having such heroes with us, we seek to set fear among ourselves. I say to you, the Pandava army will not defeat us; but we will vanquish ourselves, before battle is even joined."

Briefly, his face was dark. "Then, I have Karna with me. I know there are those in this sabha who differ, but Parasurama Bhargava said that Karna is his equal. My Pitama says Karna is not powerful, any more, because Indra came to him like a beggar and Karna gave the Deva his kavacha and kun-dala. But what Bheeshma does not know is that Karna had something from Indra in return; something he would not have taken, except for his love for me. Karna has Indra's Shakti."

A murmur arose in the sabha. Duryodhana cried, "And yet, like women, we let fear rule us? Listen to me, all of you, my loving friends. Let me name some of the warriors who will fight on our side and then decide if your hearts still

quail at the thought of the Pandavas.

Hear their names: Bheeshma, who by himself would do for the enemy, Drona, Kripa, Aswat-thama, peerless Karna, Baahlika, Brihadratha, Bhagadatta, Shalya, Sala, Vinda, Anuvinda, Jayadratha, my hundred brothers led by my ferocious Dusasana, Shakuni and I myself. I have eleven aksauhinis against their seven. I ask you, should I spend sleepless nights, as Sanjaya wants, in terror that we shall be defeated, when my reason cries out that victory will be ours? No! I am no coward. I will not give in to the Pandavas. We will fight and I will win!”

There was some applause in the Kuru sabha, especially from those close to Duryodhana. Dhrit-arashtra sat much straighter in his throne and there was a proud smile on his lips to listen to his masterful son. Sensing the tide of opinion turn in his favor, Duryodhana pressed on.

“Why should I tremble at the decrepit Virata’s name, when the tameless Trigartas are with me? Susharma smashed Virata’s chariot and seized him. Susharma will crush the old Matsya again for me. Will Arjuna fight all the Trigartas by himself? Ah, my father, be at peace. Listen to your own counsel, as you always have, because you are wiser than those who presume to advise you. I tell you, I will win the war!”

Duryodhana went back to his place and sat down, amidst loud cheering from all the Kuru sabha, except Bheeshma, Drona, Sanjaya and a few others. Dhritarashtra’s fear had not left him entirely and the king said, “I have a last question for you, Sanjaya. Tell me, are the sons of Pandu as confident as my son? Are they prepared for war? Do they also feel that victory will be theirs?”

Sanjaya laughed. “They are better prepared than we are. Yet, they are not eager for bloodshed as your son is. Yudhishtira begged me to prevent the war if I could. Shall I tell you what the Pandava said?

‘Sanjaya, go back and say to Duryodhana, “Because of you, cousin, we have suffered in exile as you cannot begin to imagine. More than anything, it is what you did to Panchali that we cannot forgive. But you are our blood and we do not want war with you; I only want my kingdom back. Why, Duryodhana, even if you don’t give me back my kingdom, I still do not want this war. I shall be content with just five towns.

Give me Indraprastha, Vrikaprastha, Jayanta, Varanavrata and a fifth of your choosing and I will be satisfied. Why should we make war on each other? Let brothers live as brothers and fathers not be riven from their sons. The Kauravas and the Pandavas are one blood; let us live in peace. Cousin, for the

sake of peace I will give up my kingdom. I have no wish to be the cause for eighteen aksauhinis slaughtering one another. But these five towns you must give me.”

Sanjaya, I have no secrets. Look over our forces if you wish and see what they are. But then, go back to Hastinapura and tell Bheeshma and Dhritarashtra that, if it is fought, this war shall be the end of the rule of the kshatriyas on earth, regardless of who wins or loses.’

So I went among those legions, I spoke to kshatriyas and common soldiers. I asked them who would be their Senapati and I learnt that it would most likely be Dhrishtadyumna. However, they have not decided yet and there is to be a council to make the choice.

But I did learn that their plans for war are carefully laid. They have even agreed among themselves which of them will kill which of us.”

Sinking swiftly back into fear, Dhritarashtra whispered, “How is that?”

“Shikhandi has chosen Bheeshma for himself.” The Pitama felt a tremor, as of fate. He saw Amba’s face before his eyes. Sanjaya knew the Pandavas’ plans well. “To keep his vow, Bheema will hunt Duryodhana and his brothers. Arjuna has marked Karna, Aswatthama and Jayadratha. The Kekaya brothers say they will kill their cousins who have joined Duryodhana. The Malavas and Salvas will confront the Trigartas. Abhimanyu, who bears both Arjuna’s and Krishna’s blood in his veins, has chosen the Kosala king Brihadbala and Duryodhana’s sons to be his prey. Dhrishtadyumna will stalk Drona, with the Pandavas’ sons to help him. The fire-born prince swears he will kill the Acharya and fulfil his destiny. Satyaki is furious with Kritavarman for joining Duryodhana and swears to kill him. Sahadeva means to keep his oath and have Shakuni’s life and Nakula Uluka’s.

My lord, they are well prepared for war. The thirteen years of exile have strengthened their bodies and spirits, while your sons have lived in luxury’s soft lap. The Pandavas have no doubt that, since dharma and Krishna are both with them, victory also shall be theirs.”

Once more, cold terror gripped Dhritarashtra. His voice unsteady, he said, “You are right, Sanjaya. We shall all die if we don’t give Yudhishtira back his kingdom.”

Duryodhana cried angrily, “My lord, how can you let fear move you so easily? It is the only way we can lose this war and that is exactly what the Pandavas intend: to frighten you with their cunning talk of peace and dharma.

Can't you see they are afraid? Here they are, agreeing to settle for just five towns and you speak of us losing the war to them!"

But after last night's encounter with Vidura and Sanat-sujata, Dhritarashtra was not convinced by his son. Weak with fear, he said, "War is a great evil, as Yudhishtira says. How can we think of sacrificing so many lives for our selfishness, our greed? It is not dharma that we keep a kingdom that belongs to Pandu's sons. Duryodhana, listen to me, I speak from love. Neither you nor I will profit from keeping what is not ours. Turn away from evil, it is still not too late. The world will praise us and we shall have our honor back.

It is harder to seek peace at this stage, I know. But just think, Duryodhana, all these kings gathered here, who have come with their armies because they love you: in their hearts, they would much rather not fight this war. If you make peace with the sons of Pandu, every one of these kshatriyas will bless you.

Duryodhana sprang up and cried furiously, "Very well! None of these kings need stay and fight for me. Let them all leave and take their legions with them. No one here need fight for me. I have Dusasana and I have Karna. The three of us are enough to demolish the Pandava army!

Hear me clearly, my lord, all of you: I will never return their kingdom to the Pandavas, not all of it, not five towns, not five villages. Why, I will not give them land to cover the point of a needle! I have heard enough craven talk of peace. I want no peace with them. I want war. I have always wanted war with my cousins. I want to see them dead!"

Silence fell on the sabha. In a lower voice, Duryodhana went on, "Of course, Yudhishtira wants peace, but not for any reason of dharma, as he makes out; he wants peace because he is afraid. He begs me for just five towns. I can easily give him what he asks. But if I give him even a speck of earth, I would be admitting that he is right and I am wrong.

Once, I used to admire Yudhishtira. I thought he was wise, that he was brave and noble. Now he sends word begging five towns to escape fighting a war. Yudhishtira, who was lord of the earth! Exile has broken his spirit, if he ever had any. These Pandavas are cowards and I do not respect them any more. They are not fit to rule one village, let alone five towns, or a kingdom. I will give them nothing, except battle!"

Vidura rose and said, "Do you believe Yudhishtira is a fool, because he is gentle? Haven't you noticed for which towns he has asked? He doesn't for a moment believe you will give him what he asks. He knows you will refuse and

there will be war. But by naming just these towns, he is reminding you and the wise men of this sabha, of the trail of the Pandavas' suffering.

Vrikaprastha, first: Pramanakoti where, Duryodhana, you poisoned Bheema and pushed him into the river. Varanavrata, where you had Purochana build the house of lac. Indraprastha, the wasteland you gave them, Dhritarashtra, as their patrimony. Jayanta: Duryodhana, you have not forgotten the sabha you built in envy of the Mayaa sabha, after you came home from the Rajasuya; the sabha that was your pretext for calling the Pandavas to Hastinapura for the game of dice.

The trail that led to exile; are you so dull that you can't see what Yudhishtira is saying to you? He says, 'After all you have made us suffer, you say I must be patient. Who is there as patient as I am? But now, the fifth town I leave to your choice. If you do not give me Indraprastha, I shall take Hastinapura. If you don't give me back my kingdom, we will have war.'"

Dhritarashtra breathed, "He is not afraid, but angry! Arjuna befriended Agni Deva when the Khandava vana burned. The God of fire will help the Pandavas against us. Arjuna fought his father Indra for Agni's sake and now Agni will burn the Kauravas to repay his debt.

Have we all lost our wits that we forget who these sons of my brother Pandu truly are? They are no blood of ours, but Devaputras! Won't Dharma, Indra, Vayu and the Aswins help their natural sons? They are Gods; how will we resist them? Why, Varuna has already given Arjuna the Gandiva."

Dhritarashtra was beside himself, almost raving. "When Bheema met his brother on the mountain, Hanuman swore he would sit on Arjuna's banner. The Gods are with the Pandavas and we are on the side of darkness. We have no hope of winning this war; my sons will all die. No! We do not want this war with the Pandavas. We must give back his kingdom to Yudhishtira."

Duryodhana was on his feet, roaring, "Father! How can you be so sure the Devas are with the Pandavas? The Gods are indifferent to our petty quarrels. They have no attachments or enmities in earthly affairs; we are too far beneath them. If Indra, Vayu, Dharma and the Aswins were concerned about their sons, would they have waited before avenging them? Thirteen years is a long time.

Perhaps, as you say, they have dharma with them. But shall we fear them just for that? Dharma is with me, as well. I have been a good king, our people will tell you as much. The rains fall in season over our kingdom and my subjects are not poor or unhappy. Ask my friends, they will tell you I am loyal and

loving. How can the Gods judge a king like me harshly? No Deva is against us, be certain that we shall win this war.”

With that and sudden tears stinging his eyes, Duryodhana walked out of his father’s court. The next moment, Karna was up and had followed his friend. Then, in a show of solidarity, the other kings and princes all stood up, as a man and went after the Kaurava. Slowly, Bheeshma and Drona also left. Dhritarashtra was left alone with Sanjaya. The king sat in his throne, sobbing.

TEN

A SECOND COUNCIL IN UPAPLAVYA

Meanwhile, some days after Sanjaya left, Yudhishtira called another council in Upaplavya. He said to Krishna in that sabha, “You heard Dhritarashtra’s message, my Lord. My uncle does not intend to return my kingdom to me. The man who should be as a father to us is like a thief instead. I fear there will be war. How else do two kshatriyas resolve their enmity? Will you go to Hastinapura, Krishna? To sue, one last time, for peace.”

Krishna said quietly, “I will. And if I can achieve the impossible and make peace between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, why, my fame will live forever. No one shall be more pleased than I if the kings of the earth give up their hubris and save themselves from death.”

Yudhishtira had a second thought, “Duryodhana cannot be trusted, there is no telling what he may do. And if anything were to happen to you, Krishna...”

Krishna smiled. “Yes, they may try to harm me: Duryodhana, his brothers and their uncle Shakuni. Men like these will stoop to anything. And if they do, Yudhishtira, I will save you the trouble of a war. I will kill them all.”

He said this so simply and somehow no one doubted he would do as he said. Krishna continued, “Don’t fear for me, I am in no danger; though I feel sure my mission will be in vain. We all heard Dhritarashtra’s message; he does not want peace, perhaps because Duryodhana gives him no choice in the matter. Dhritarashtra is a coward, left to himself he would not fight; but his son would rather die than see you back on the throne of Indraprastha.

But you are a kshatriya, Yudhishtira. How can you ask for peace after you heard Dhritarashtra’s message? How can you still have feelings for these monsters? Or think of them as your relatives? They have never requited the love you have for them. They are not your blood, who treat you with such hatred and contempt. A kshatriya has no kinsmen, Yudhishtira, only friends and enemies. These are your enemies. Not for a moment have they thought of you as a nephew or a cousin, not the elders of Hastinapura. I say they deserve death for what they have done.

The court of Hastinapura is a nest of serpents. It needs to be burned with fire. In that city today you have just the hollow name of Kuru; the rest is an illusion. The one you so fondly call your grandfather, Bheeshma, won’t he be the

first to face you in war? What Pitama is he to you? He will fight for Duryodhana.”

Krishna saw the sadness in his cousin’s face and he shook his head and sighed. “Ah, Yudhishtira, I can’t fathom you. What weakness or strength makes you reach out again to these sinners with an offer of peace? For myself, I will tell you why I am going to Hastinapura. It is not that I believe there is any possibility of peace. No. I am going to tell the people of that city and the kings who have allied themselves to Duryodhana, about you. I want the world to realize how noble you are and how vile Duryo-dhana and his blind father.

Let the people know that you will accept peace, if they give you even five towns. Let them know how arrogant Duryodhana is that he will not give you even these. I am going to Hastinapura so the truth may be preserved in the hearts of common men. Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana will never tell their people the truth of what happened between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Already the blind one seeks to make a villain of you with the message he sent through Sanjaya.

While I am away, cousin, prepare for war. And let war begin as soon as I return.”

Yudhishtira bent his head and said, “I leave our lives in your hands, Krishna. You always know what is best for us.”

“I see omens of war everywhere I turn. The birds of night are awake all day, as if in terror and those of day sing at midnight. Wolves come out of their forests and howl at the cities of men. Elephants and horses run from jungle to jungle, in strange panic, as if seeking a sanctuary that exists nowhere on earth any more. Let us not deceive ourselves. There will surely be war and we must be prepared for it.”

There was a brief silence, while every king in that sabha was so absorbed in his own thoughts that no one noticed Bheema squirming in his place. Suddenly, the son of the wind said, “Krishna, I will be happy if you can make peace between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. We do not want the sin of killing our cousins on our conscience. Don’t try and frighten Duryodhana by saying how powerful we are. He is proud and obstinate; he will not be intimidated. But gentler persuasion may succeed.

I agree with Yudhishtira that we must do everything in our power to have peace. Otherwise, a hundred kings will die, thousands of kshatriyas and countless common soldiers. Think of their wives and children; war is a calamity

that we must avert if we possibly can. Arjuna, I am sure you understand what I mean and you agree with me.”

All that council, especially Bheema’s brothers, stared at him in amazement. Then, Krishna began to laugh, golden laughter ringing through the morning. He cried, “Bheema! Are you really saying this? You want peace? Until last night, we heard of nothing but the war from you, how long you had waited for it. You told us how you would tear out Dusasana’s heart and smash Duryodhana’s thigh. You said you had not slept properly these last thirteen years, for the shame you had to swallow. Some of us have seen you wriggling like an angry serpent in Yudhishtira’s grasp. We have seen you sit apart from your brothers in the jungle, as if you carried an insupportable burden.

I heard people say that Bheema had gone mad in his frustration. You sat alone, smoldering like a fire covered with ashes, your brow knit, talking to yourself, your hands sweating as you clenched and unclenched them. Then you would jump up with a growl, pull up a tree, dash it on the ground and begin to cry and laugh at once. You would shout, ‘The lotus may bloom on the peak of ice, the sun may rise in the west; but I will keep my vow. I will break Duryodhana’s thigh where he dared call Panchali to sit!’

You would brandish your mace and roar so the forest echoed with your wrath. Is this the same Bheema, who is faint-hearted as a woman today at the very thought of war? Who begs me to go and sue the Kauravas for peace, because he balks at the thought of blood? Ah, Bheema, you are the raft on which your brothers will cross over the sea of misfortune. But if you turn coward, I dread to think what will become of the others.”

Krishna saw his words went home. He saw Bheema’s eyes become red as plums at the word coward. It was as Krishna intended; it would never do if Bheema became soft at this time.

The Dark One continued, “Think back, Bheema! Remember the shame of the game of dice; remember the long anguish of exile. Remember you are a kshatriya and the men you have sworn to kill are sinners. Put aside this womanliness; harden your heart against these affections.

Peace! You talk of peace, you whom peace does not suit at all. You are a kshatriya, Bheema, every fiber of you. What peace can be yours, until you kill them all? What has happened to you that you are afraid now?”

Bheema sprang up and cried, “You wrong me, Krishna! How can you accuse me of being a coward? When the war begins you will see if Bheema is

afraid. Not Indra himself will save Duryodhana and his brothers, when these hands lay hold of them. Look at my hands, Krishna! Aren't they made just for war? Look at this body!"

He was trembling. "Wild elephants shall not stand before Bheema when he takes the field with his mace! I only pitied those who would face me in battle, their families whom I will bereave. And you call me a coward?" He smote his chest and roared, so the sabha shook. "Bheema is no coward, Krishna! Never! Never!"

Krishna took his hand. "That is the Bheema we know! This is no time for softness. We are on the brink of war and you are the greatest force we have, our strongest warrior. More than on any of the others, we rely on you. If you turn to fine feelings now, what will become of the rest? Who doesn't know that Bheema is no coward, but the bravest kshatriya on earth? I only said what I did because I want Bheema to be himself."

He embraced his cousin. "Never fear, there will be a war. No one will stop it and you will have your revenge. I swear you will wash your shame and your anger in streams of blood. Don't speak of peace any more. There will be no peace, but war!"

Bheema gave a growl of satisfaction and sat down. Now, Krishna turned to the third Pandava and Arjuna said, "I agree with you, Krishna. Duryodhana will never accept peace. He has gone too far down the way of sin. I feel we should not compromise Yudhishtira's dignity while suing for peace."

Then he smiled. "But, finally, only what you want will come to pass, my Lord. All this is just your maya! If you are determined there shall be peace between us cousins, then peace there will be; and even Duryodhana will do what you ask. But if you decide there should be war and the earth's burden removed—as the rishis say you have—so it shall be. Whatever it is, we will walk the path you choose for us, happily."

Krishna laughed. "Arjuna, I wish it were as simple as that. I will do my best to convince Duryodhana that we should have peace, not war; and I will not bargain with Yudhishtira's dignity. But there is no other miracle I can work. Like you, I fear Duryodhana has gone too far down the way of evil to turn back willingly. He is hardly master of himself or his own fate, any more. He is an instrument of other sinister forces; they will not relent, even if Duryodhana wants to. But I will go to Hastinapura to clear Yudhishtira's name with the people, because he is the noblest man alive."

Krishna turned to Nakula, who said in his soft voice, “The thoughts of men are like the shapes of clouds in the sky, always changing. When we were in the jungle, or on our tirtha-yatra, we did not think much of a kingdom. When we first came to Virata for the ajnatavasa, we thought only of not being recognized and of our exile’s end. Now the thirteen years are over and we are thinking of nothing but the kingdom, how we can win it back.

Krishna, I think we should sue for peace. Speak gently to Duryodhana at first; if he does not listen, use strong words, threaten him. Tell him about the kshatriyas who are with us. Duryodhana is just a man, like any other; he can be frightened into accepting peace on our terms. And when you are the messenger, Krishna, there is nothing that cannot be achieved.”

Krishna smiled and did not have time to turn to Sahadeva, before the youngest Pandava sprang up and cried, “We must have war, Krishna! You must make certain we do. Let the Kauravas beg for peace, if they like; but we must have war and only war, with them! What else can we want after what they did to Panchali in their sabha? How can we think of peace for even a moment? I don’t agree with my brothers. If Yudhishtira, Bheema, Arjuna and Nakula want peace, let them make shameful peace with those animals. I mean to fight, if I have to fight alone and to see Duryodhana dead. Tell him from me, Krishna, that Sahadeva says he will die.

If my brothers decide that virtue lies in seeking peace with Duryodhana, let them keep such virtue for themselves. I will fight and kill that devil!”

Satyaki jumped up and cried, “I am with you, Sahadeva! We shall have no peace with the Kauravas. Death is what Duryodhana deserves and death he shall find. Krishna, you saw these Pandavas in the forest, wearing valkala, like beggars. How can you make peace with the men who reduced them to that? The Kauravas must die, every one of them!”

The sabha resounded with the approval of the kings in it. Suddenly, Krishna turned his face to where the most beautiful woman on earth sat. Krishna asked gently, “Panchali, what have you to say?

Her lovely eyes were full of tears and she rose without wiping them, so they fell down her face. Draupadi said fiercely, “I bless Sahadeva and Satyaki! Who, it seems, are the only kshatriyas in this sabha. Krishna, you know everything that happened. I beg you, if you care at all for my honor, use no soft words with Duryodhana. Gentleness wins only good men, not fiends of hell. Hastinapura is a nest of demons; it must burn!

I wonder that you can even ask me what I have to say. I want war, Krishna, a bloody war to avenge what I suffered on that terrible day and for thirteen years after. I want every Kaurava killed. The elders who sat by, not lifting a finger to help me when I begged them to, I want to see them dead! I know Yudhishtira was always for peace, at whatever cost to himself and his family. But when I hear Bheema, Arjuna and Nakula talking of peace today, I can hardly stand it. I want neither peace nor friendship with the Kauravas. If you love me at all, Krishna, if you ever felt sorry for what happened to me, make sure there is war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. I must see my enemies lying dead on the field, as carrion for jackals and vultures.”

She lost control of herself. Convulsed with sobs, she took her hair, hanging behind her like a dark serpent and brandished it at that court. “I have not tied my hair since the day Dusasana dragged me by it! Look at my hair, all you kings. I carry it like a stain on my very soul, that the beast defiled it with his filthy hands.

In the forest, Yudhishtira said to me that I must be patient for thirteen years. I have waited thirteen years and only I know how long the wait has been. And now what do I hear from Yudhishtira? Not a word of war or revenge, but again words of peace. And today I am amazed to hear Bheema talking of peace! Duryodhana was not mistaken when he called these cowards. How lofty it is to talk peace. But who will bring peace to my heart?

For thirteen years, every night I was awake thinking of just one thing: the day I would see Dusasana’s jeweled hand cut off and lying on the ground streaming blood. I will have no rest until I see that sight before my eyes. Krishna, think of me when you are in Hastinapura. For it was I who was dragged like a whore through the palace there, I who was shamed in front of all the Kuru sabha. And I say to you, there is a fire burning in my heart and the only cure for it is war. I beg you, Krishna, don’t come back from that evil city without declaring war!”

And she stood trembling, while her tears flowed. Krishna said to her, “As you cry today, Panchali, I swear the wives of the Kauravas shall weep very soon. But there will be no cure for their tears, because they will have lost everything. Not one Kaurava shall live. I have not forgotten what I promised you in the Kamyaka vana. I have come into the world for this war.” His voice was wistful, “The earth must be rid of her burden of kings and so she shall. Dry you eyes, Panchali, let me see you smile. The thirteen years of exile are over. I promise you, Yudhishtira will be lord of the earth again.”

Draupadi wiped her tears and smiled wanly at Krishna. He said, “It is

decided then, I will leave for Hastinapura tomorrow.”

Thus, the second council at Upaplavya ended.

The next morning dawned, bright and auspicious and Krishna was up early. The Dark One bathed. He worshipped the sun and the fire and then called Satyaki.

“Prepare my chariot, Satyaki. See to it yourself that my weapons are in it. Duryodhana and his brothers are not to be trusted and I must not let them find me unprepared.”

Now Yudhishtira came there and said, “Satyaki, you must go with Krishna. I am reluctant to send him at all on this pointless mission and I will not let him go alone.”

The chariot was ready and all the Pandavas came to see Krishna and Satyaki on their way. Yudhishtira’s last words to him were, “Give our mother our love and tell her we shall soon be with her.”

Krishna embraced them all and, cheerful as ever, set out for the Kuru capital.

ELEVEN

KRISHNA ARRIVES IN HASTINAPURA

The morning Krishna set out on his mission to Hastinapura, the strangest omens were seen. There was not a cloud in the sky, yet suddenly, in diverse parts of the land, thunder and lightning erupted in the vacant azure and uncanny rains lashed the earth. On that day, rivers turned around and flowed back to their sources; deep and quiet wells gushed forth in geysers.

On his way, Krishna saw none of these omens, but only nature's bounty: trees laden with flowers and fruit and birds singing in their branches to mark the savior's passage. In every town and village he rode through, the people came out in crowds to greet the Avatara and they stood enchanted by the sight of him, blue and ineffable. At Vrikasthala, beside a pool of lotuses, Krishna stopped his chariot.

“Night grows on us, let us rest here tonight.”

Meanwhile, in Hastinapura, his spies came to Dhritarashtra in his sabha and said, “My lord, Krishna is on his way here, bringing an embassy of peace from the Pandavas.”

Dhritarashtra sent for Bheeshma, Vidura and Sanjaya. Drona and Duryodhana were already in the court. When the Pitama and the king's brother had joined them, Dhritarashtra said in some excitement, “I have wonderful news. Krishna is coming to Hastinapura! Vidura, let no effort be spared to give him a grand welcome. All the munis say no one on earth is as worthy of worship as Krishna. Besides, we need his blessings more than ever and his good offices.

Open our wayside retreats for him, along his journey; and when he arrives, we must receive him with gifts of chariots, elephants and jewels. Krishna honors us by coming to Hastinapura. I will go out myself to welcome him. Vidura, you must arrange the reception; overlook no detail. He will spend tonight at Kusasthala and be with us by midday tomorrow.”

There was a brief silence in his court and the king turned his face this way and that. He asked, “Vidura, don't you approve? Don't you think Krishna deserves the gifts I mean to offer him? Why are you so quiet?”

His brother laughed. “Of course, my lord, he deserves your gifts. Why, no man who was ever born into the world, or ever shall be, is as great as Krishna. Not just your gifts, he deserves the very earth.

Yet, that is not what makes you so generous; nor is it any love for Krishna. You want to bribe the incomparable one. You mean to try to buy him to your side, to drive a wedge between him and the Pandavas with your gifts. You will not part with five towns to your nephews and now you speak of giving horses and elephants, chariots and jewels to their messenger.

I beg you, my lord, do not be foolish; don't insult Krishna with such a barbaric gesture. He will not take what you give him, but scoff at you. His very life is bound to Arjuna's. How can you hope to part him from Arjuna and his brothers with your paltry gifts?

If you really want to honor the Dark One, accept the terms he brings for peace. He comes in the hope that you and your sons will see reason. He comes in a last effort to make peace in the House of Kuru and save the world from war.

Dhritarashtra, remember the Pandavas have no father. At least for Pandu's sake, think that you should be like a father to them. There is still hope, my brother; if you turn back to dharma, Krishna will heal the bitterness between the Kauravas and Pandavas. He will even persuade Draupadi to forgive your sons for what they did to her. But you must take the first step toward peace yourself; no one can do that for you. The fate of the world as we know it is in your hands. I pray that you make the just choice, though I fear you will not."

Duryodhana rose and, surprisingly, said, "I agree with Vidura. It is foolish to think we can estrange Krishna from the Pandavas. He will laugh at you if you try to bribe him; worse, he will think we are afraid of him. No, we must not insult Krishna by trying to buy him to our side. We must receive him with dignity, or we shall be the laughing-stock of the world."

Bheeshma said, "It will make no difference to Krishna if you honor him or not; he is above your honoring or insulting him. Nor will you sway him with foolish gifts, because he is a man of truth. He comes not to seek some petty wealth for himself, but genuinely to secure peace. He comes to see you acknowledge the injustice done to the Pandavas. He comes with the faint hope that dharma may be restored to the House of Kuru without bloodshed. The only way you can honor Krishna is to give the Pandavas back their kingdom."

Duryodhana jumped up and cried, "Pitama! You always take our cousins' side, but I will not give in to them or to you. I will never share what belongs to me. Why should I? After the Vaishnava yagna the kingdom is mine and I mean to keep it."

Bheeshma said in despair, "Dhritarashtra, this son of yours is so full of evil

that he has lost his reason. I fear his time has come to die and he will not listen to anything that might save him. And I cannot stand any more raving.”

Bheeshma rose and walked out of the sabha and that was an end to the day’s deliberations. Late the next morning, Krishna arrived with Satyaki and Dhritarashtra went to the city-gates with Bheeshma, Drona and Kripa to receive him. Duryodhana went, as well and his brothers. The people of Hastinapura milled in the streets of the city of elephants to welcome the Avatara. They reached out loving hands and chanted his name, as he rode through them. The women flung flowers down on him from their balconies.

Krishna came to Dhritarashtra’s palace and was ushered into the sabha of Hastinapura. The king had asked for a jeweled throne to be set beside his own and Krishna was shown to that seat. When he had greeted the Kuru elders, the Dark One sat chatting to the Kaurava princes and he was full of smiles. It seemed this was another day like any other and he had come to the city for a friendly visit. Then, Krishna said, “If you allow me, my lords, I want to meet Vidura in his palace and pay my respects to my aunt Kunti.”

Dhritarashtra gave orders for Krishna to be taken to Vidura’s home. He sent word to his brother and Vidura came in excitement to his door to receive him with arghya. He, at least, was entirely aware who it was that honored him with a visit.

When they sat together inside, Vidura asked, “How are Pandu’s sons, Krishna? I fear there will be a war between them and the Kauravas. Duryodhana is determined to fight, rather than return a foot of land to his cousins.”

Krishna told him about the sabha in Upaplavya and all that was said on the last day, before he set out for Hastinapura. “I have little hope that Duryodhana will turn back to dharma now. But I thought I must come here to clear Yudhishtira’s name, so the people know that he still wants peace.”

Vidura bowed his head and Krishna saw his eyes were full. He laid a hand on Vidura’s arm and said, “Be consoled, Vidura. None of us can change fate and everything that happens is for the best. Now take me to my aunt Kunti. I am sure she is waiting to see me and have news of her sons.”

When Vidura brought Krishna into Kunti’s chambers, she rose with a cry and embraced her nephew. “Oh, Krishna! I am so happy you have come.”

She made him sit next to her and held his hand tightly. She wept now and said, “I feel so much stronger, that you are here. Tell me about my sons. How are Yudhishtira and my Bheema? You know Bheema was always his older brother’s

favorite. How did my boys spend their years in the forest, with all the danger that lurks there? How did Bheema control himself for so long, after the way Dhrit-arashtra's sons abused him? Ah, forgive me, Krishna, I know I am not waiting for you to answer my questions. I have waited so long to ask them, that they will not come singly, but all together!

How is my Arjuna, your friend? How did he conceal himself during the final year of the ajnata-vasa? I am surprised no one discovered my flame-like son. And Sahadeva, who is so delicate and sensitive? He looks like a grown man, but he is just a child at heart. And my youngest, my Nakula, my most handsome son at whom women always gazed? How did he hide his dark beauty during the final year? Krishna, how is Draupadi? I cannot think how she endured the hardship thrust upon her.

Time and again, I see Dusasana dragging proud Panchali through the palace of Hastinapura. I see my sons standing with their heads hung in the sabha, while Dhritarashtra's princes reviled their queen. Only your grace saved her from utter shame."

Kunti wiped her eyes and sighed, "Krishna, though I have known great joy in this life, I have also suffered as few women do. First, I became a widow and we came here to Hastinapura to live on the charity of those who did not truly love us. Then they tried to kill us. When, at last, we settled in Indraprastha I thought our troubles were over. They were just beginning and fate separated me from my sons.

We have suffered enough! We also deserve some happiness, after so many years of anguish. Tell my sons the time has come for them to show they are kshatriyas. Tell them their mother says it is their dharma to fight. And if they don't, they are no sons of mine!"

She sobbed again. Krishna took her hands, "Don't cry. Your sons have become great men by their long penance and no force on earth can resist them now. Their night is ending; day is at hand and victory. I promise you, Yudhishtira shall soon be lord of the earth."

TWELVE IN VIDURA'S HOUSE

Krishna walked into Duryodhana's palace and it was more opulent than Dhritarashtra's. In his garish sabha, Duryodhana sat on a golden throne, with Shakuni, Karna and Dusasana around him. They all rose when Krishna entered and Duryodhana came forward, smiling, to welcome the Blue One. There was a place, lower than Duryodhana's throne, set apart for Krishna, a silk-covered chair inlaid with ivory and precious stones. Krishna allowed himself to be led to it.

Duryodhana said, "Welcome to our palace, Krishna. Honor me by sharing a meal with us."

Krishna replied, "I must decline your invitation for the moment, Duryodhana."

The Kaurava's eyes flashed. "You wound me, Krishna. Why won't you eat with us? We have arranged music and dancing for you, as you love. Our cooks prepared a feast, but you went straight to Vidura's home. Why?"

"A messenger may not eat until the task he has come for is fulfilled."

"That hardly matters! I have heard you say you are impartial in the dispute between the Pandavas and ourselves. We are fond of you, Krishna; there is no enmity between you and me. When you go to Upaplavya you stay with the Pandavas, don't you?"

There was an inscrutable look in Krishna's eyes. He said, "I fear you will make me say things I never meant to, Duryodhana. One eats in another man's house out of friendship, goodwill, or necessity; none of these applies between us. I do not care for the feast you have made for me; I never eat in a thief's home because his food is polluted. And I am not starving that I need your hospitality."

Duryodhana's eyes blazed. Krishna would not be interrupted, though he spoke equably still, "As for the Pandavas, I do not hold you and them in equal regard. The truth is, Duryodhana, I am the soul of the sons of Pandu. They are mine in a very special way, because they are men of truth. You have shown, repeatedly, that you detest them; often enough, you have tried to have them killed. You banished them by deceit, humiliated them in your sabha and now you refuse to give back what is theirs. You are my enemy, Duryodhana and I will not eat in an enemy's house. I will eat in Vidura's home, because he is a friend who

loves me.”

Krishna’s voice and his presence were suddenly so awesome that even Duryodhana was tongue-tied. Smiling still, Krishna got up and walked out of that palace.

He strolled down the open street and the people ran to him, to greet him, to clasp his hand or offer him a flower. Bheeshma and Kripa came out and said, “Krishna, we have a palace ready for you to stay in.”

He answered them, “You are too kind, my lords, but I am going to stay with Vidura.”

They stared at him; but he waved to them and walked on to Vidura’s home. Vidura washed Krishna’s feet himself, in some ecstasy that the Avatara had chosen his home to stay in. It was late afternoon. They ate together and then Krishna said, “I am a little tired. I would like to rest for an hour.”

“Your rooms are ready, Krishna, I will show you to them.”

When Krishna had slept, he rose and bathed and now night had fallen. He went out to join Vidura. When they sat together, sipping wine in an open courtyard, with fateful stars shining down on them, Vidura said slowly, “I think your coming here was a mistake, Krishna. Perhaps you don’t realize how far down the road to ruin Duryodhana has gone. He is bent on having war and nothing will stop him. He thinks he will win with superior numbers. He says he has Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa, Aswatthama, Karna and Jayadratha with him, besides his brothers and the other kshatriyas of the eleven aksauhinis. How can he lose? Most of all, he depends on Karna.

Ah, Krishna, how much I have tried to tell him that his sins are ranged against him and they will drag him down to his death. How often I have begged him to relent. Not just I, but the other elders of the court. But he won’t listen and Karna, Shakuni and Dusasana tell him to fight. They are so certain they will win the war. It is no use your trying to make peace; Duryodhana is in no mood to listen to wisdom.

I beg you, my Lord, don’t go to Dhritarashtra’s sabha. It is not a court of dharma any more. I fear they will insult you and the thought distresses me.”

Krishna said, “Vidura, I am touched by your concern. I have nothing to hide from you, so listen to why I have come. I have not come with much hope that my mission will succeed. Yet, it is my dharma to try to save the lives of these men, who seem so eager to die. If I do succeed, Vidura, I shall have glory; and even if I fail, no blame will attach to me. At least, I will be satisfied that I spared

no effort in a good cause.

Every man can be redeemed. If a man has sinful thoughts, but does not translate them into evil deeds, no sin clings to him. So I pray it might be with the Kauravas. I read their hearts clearly and see the darkness in them. But there is always hope. Suppose, by a miracle, they decide to give back the Pandavas' kingdom because of my embassy? All men deserve every chance to save themselves; Dhrit-arashtra and his son do, as well. Most of all, the House of Kuru deserves a final chance to save itself. If I did not do everything I can to stop this war, I would fail in my dharma.

So here I am, to try to drag Duryodhana and his brothers back from the edge of a chasm. As for Yudhishtira, he still says he wants peace. Vidura, I know you will understand me when I tell you that Yudhishtira is the greatest man born into this age. Most of all, I have come here for his sake. To clear his name of any taint, so the world will remember his greatness forever.

Let the people know that it is not just anyone whom Duryodhana has sinned against, but the truest, most compassionate man on earth. Let the kings who have flocked to Duryodhana's serpent-banner know against whom they are going to war. Let them realize they mean to fight on the side of evil and let their arrogant hearts tremble a little.

Yes, this is why I have come: to let Bheeshma know and Drona and Kripa know and the others, that they clasped danger to their souls when they chose to fight against the sons of Pandu. They cannot escape this truth, let them see it clearly."

Now Krishna sighed. "Ah, Vidura, how I wish this war could be avoided. I don't think even Yudhishtira or you, or any of the others realize how terrible it will be. But I fear that not all our prayers can prevent it. I have come to make it clear on which side dharma lies and on which, adharma. That is my real mission. Gentle Vidura, you are the only Kuru in Hastinapura on the side of truth. That is why I am staying in your home. But let us speak of other things, because tomorrow I must be fresh for what I have come to say, in Dhritarashtra's sabha."

Late into the night, they sat talking of many things: of Dwaraka, of awesome kings of the past and how rapidly the times diminished. Until they turned in to sleep, they spoke of anything but the war.

THIRTEEN

IN THE COURT OF HASTINAPURA

The next morning, Duryodhana and Karna came with retinue to take Krishna to Dhritarashtra's sabha. Krishna went in his chariot with Satyaki. Duryodhana and Karna followed in Duryodhana's chariot and Kritavarman, who was also in the city, came after them. A legion of elephant and horse followed the chariots through the streets of Hastinapura, choked with the people turned out to catch a glimpse of the blue savior.

The Dark One was radiant, as he alighted at the palace steps and climbed them with Vidura and Satyaki on either side. Karna and Duryodhana went before Krishna, leading him solemnly into Dhritarashtra's court. Kritavarman walked behind them. When Krishna entered the Kuru sabha, all the elders, including the blind king, Bheeshma and Drona rose. Once more Krishna was shown to the place of honor and just as he was about to sit, he saw Narada at the door to the sabha, with some other rishis. Bheeshma rose to welcome the sages.

Krishna waited for them to be seated and only then sat. Dusasana showed Satyaki to a majestic chair and his brother Vivimsati brought Kritavarman to another.

Next to Krishna sat Vidura; not far from them, to their left, Karna and Duryodhana shared a wide seat for two and Shakuni sat beside them. Every gaze in the sabha was riveted to the Avatara's face. They gazed at him, helplessly and could not have their fill. He was more God than man today, but gentle and handsome. It was as if the Kuru sabha was elevated into a finer realm, because Krishna graced it. In his xanthic robe, he was like a blue mountain with the sun rising over it; and the kaus-tubha ruby on his breast was a gleaming secret.

The sabha sat staring raptly at him and he sat smiling at them. For a long moment, there was silence in that court; then, Krishna addressed Dhritarashtra.

"My lord, I have come to Hastinapura to prevent the deaths of all these kshatriyas. I have come to make peace between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. I am glad I have come at a time when most of what needs to be said has already been debated in this sabha. Everything is known and there is not much I have to add to the words of the wise."

They listened to him entranced; there was that quality in his voice. "Since the most ancient days, the House of Kuru is a legend upon the earth. The world

knows that yours is the oldest house in Bharatavarsha. Generations of Kuru kings have ruled vast kingdoms and they have all been renowned for their justice and their mercy.” He paused and looked around him; a slight smile still played on his face. “Dhritarashtra, it does not become you that you are the first king in your line to be so different from your sires.”

Dhritarashtra shivered in his throne. Krishna continued, “Your sons plunge down a blind alley of sin. They think nothing of fighting a murderous war in which millions shall die. It is for you to stop them. You are the king of the Kurus, my lord and not your son. You must stop this madness.

This is not the time for weakness and vacillation. You must assert yourself, as you should have done long ago. Having left it so long, it will be harder for you now. But it can still be done, if you assume the firmness that every king should have. The first step is to think kindly of your brother’s sons. Think of them not as enemies to be feared, but as your own children, your own soldiers who will make you lord of the earth. Unite this house again, Dhritarashtra, as it should have always been.

Already, there is no kingdom to rival this one. For Bheeshma protects it, Drona and Kripa, Karna, Vivimsati, Aswatthama, Jayadratha, Somadatta and Duryodhana. But just think what the glory of the House of Kuru would be if you added the names of the Pandavas and their sons to those: as it has never been before! If you can bring the Pandavas and the Kauravas together, your fame will be sung in heaven as well as the earth.

Yet, it seems you prefer to court shame and ruin, rather than glory. Tell me, Dhritarashtra, what will this war bring you except the death of your sons?” Now his voice was stern. “And the death of some millions of fighting men and of all these kshatriyas gathered here to perpetrate the madness your son has planned. You have everything to lose by this war and nothing to gain. Look at this court of dharma, defiled by this council met to plot a war between brother and brother, while its elders sit here and do nothing to stop the enormous sin. Never since the Kuru kingdom was founded, in time out of mind, has this sabha seen such shame. This is no sabha anymore, my lord, but a den of vice.

Do not take what I say lightly, because I speak with love. I say to you, return what is his to Yudhishtira. Bring back dharma to your kingdom, which yearns for it. If you don’t make the just choice, this land will be ruined past redemption and with it the world.”

He spoke so gravely that no one dared interrupt him. His words struck all of them deeply and what he said frightened them. At last, Dhritarashtra broke the

silence, “Krishna, don’t you realize how helpless I am? I do not rule this land and what I say is of little consequence. My sons are the masters here and they have no regard for my wishes any more. If you can persuade Duryodhana and his brothers and Karna and Shakuni, who wield more power than I do, I will be grateful to you forever.

But I fear your task is hopeless. We have all tried to reason with Duryodhana, to no avail. Bheeshma has tried, Vidura and even Gandhari; and I have, too. He is stubborn and determined to sacrifice us all. Still, if you can succeed where the rest of us failed, no one will be more in your debt than I.”

Duryodhana sat sullen and fierce. Krishna turned to him kindly, “Listen to me, Duryodhana. You are a son of the noblest house in all Bharatavarsha. Why do you behave as if you were born in the streets? Why has your mind turned to such pettiness? What you mean to do will not cover you in honor, as you imagine; it will fetch you eternal infamy. Turn away from this folly, Kshatriya; resume your true nature. Forsake the hatred that consumes you from within. Be the good Duryodhana again, whom the world loves! Perhaps you think it is too late for you to turn back. No man ever falls so low that he is past redemption and least of all a prince with as generous a heart as you have.

This is the hour of an historic decision, Duryodhana. Do you want to be remembered as the man who destroyed the world, or the one who had the courage to save it? For it will take more courage to turn your face away from sin, than it will for you to be obstinate. Choose wisely, Duryodhana and be the bravest kshatriya of the Kuru line. Make your father and your grandfather happy, your gurus and your mother proud. Change the course of destiny; you still can.”

Duryodhana had grown pale and he sat stiller than ever. Krishna went on, his power deeply upon the sabha. “There are three kinds of men in this world, Duryodhana. There are the selfless ones, who seldom leave the path of dharma. Then there are those who seek their own benefit in whatever they do. Even if that is your nature, you should think wisely, of what will profit you. Death surely will not.

If you want to be king in Hastinapura, won’t it be better if you have the Pandavas’ support, rather than their enmity? If you make peace with him, Yudhishtira will crown you yuvaraja of this city; and after your father’s time, you will be king of the Kurus. The Pandavas will be content with Indraprastha and never be a threat to you. And with your cousins on your side, who else will dare challenge you?

Duryodhana’s face twitched in contempt; he exchanged a scornful smile

with Karna. Krishna paused, then, his voice softer, said, “There is also the third kind of man. He lives to sin, because nothing else pleases him; his unnatural thirst is satisfied only with blood. Duryodhana, you are not that kind of man, are you? Cast off your old life as a snake does his skin. Emerge anew as a king of truth and make this age the brightest one in history. You hold the future of the world in your palm; only you can save it.”

Bheeshma cried, “Listen to him, Duryodhana, make a new beginning. I beg you! Do it in your mother’s name, for her sake.”

Drona urged, “Krishna speaks the truth, Duryodhana, this can be your moment of greatness. You can do this, my prince; your heart is big enough. Only the first step is hard, the rest will come easily.”

Vidura said, “If you don’t listen to wisdom, it is not yourself you will hurt most, but your mother and father. I pity them, that they will have to survive their eldest son and most likely, all their sons. Who will look after them in their dotage?”

Bheeshma begged him again and Drona as well. Duryodhana had not spoken a word, but only listened grimly to their united entreaty. Vidura said, “Duryodhana, the choice is so simple: between death and life. Why do you hesitate?”

FOURTEEN

DURYODHANA AND KRISHNA

Though his eyes were restless, Duryodhana had listened patiently to everything Krishna said. Now he rose and addressed Krishna quietly, reasonably. “You spoke eloquently, Krishna and all that you said was for me: all the blame. My father and my grandfather, also, point their fingers at me, as do my Acharyas and my uncle Vidura. I have tried to see your point of view; but I am afraid I cannot, because this is not nearly as simple as you make it out to be.

Let me tell you my version of whatever has happened so far. We asked Yudhishtira to play dice and he agreed readily enough. He enjoys the game, more than I do anyway. We did not force him to play and it was not as if he did not know, from the start, that he was to play against Shakuni.

Yudhishtira lost his kingdom at dice. How do you blame me for that? I did not decide what the stakes would be. I did not sit in my cousin’s place and play rashly for him. It is easy to accuse me; but if you think about it, how am I responsible? Yudhishtira was foolhardy and he was unlucky. How is Duryodhana to blame for that?

This court knows I returned everything he lost to me. But you say it was my fault he came back to play a second time and lost it all once more. How am I responsible for his stupidity that he thought he could play an acknowledged master of dice like Shakuni? And does my cousin wager some thousand gold coins as other kings do? No. He wagers his entire treasury, then his army, then his kingdom and finally, his brothers, himself and his queen! Wasn’t this an emperor’s arrogance? How am I to blame for it? Didn’t I return his brothers and his wife to him? Didn’t I set him free, though he had lost himself to me? Yet, I am to blame.”

Krishna sat smiling faintly, none of the others spoke. The Kaurava continued, “And not only all of you, but my cousins, also, have decided that I am to blame for their misfortunes. Do I control the motions of the planets that I decide what happens to every man on this earth?

They have joined forces with the Panchala king, whom these same Pandavas once attacked for Acharya Drona’s revenge. Now they mean to fight us together. For what? For something they imagine I did to them. I did nothing. Their troubles were of their own making and I am not afraid of Pandu’s sons.”

His voice rose, “As long as my conscience is clear, I will never fear them, or anyone else. Why, I would not fear Indra himself. We will not bow to their threats. We have Bheeshma and Drona with us; Kripa, Karna and Aswatthama are with me. No power on earth can stand against these men. And, as for me, when I accept the Pandavas’ challenge I only honor the way of the ksha-triya. My dharma is to fight.

If I must, I will die fighting. Otherwise, I will make a bed of arrows for my enemies to sleep on forever. Isn’t that kshatriya dharma? To fight and either die or be killed. The warrior that dies without bowing his head to his enemy goes straight to heaven. Then why do you ask me to humiliate myself so I can save my life? What will my miserable life be worth if I save it like that? I prefer to die without having submitted in spirit, than to live as less than a king. This is the law every kshatriya is born into and it is the only dharma I acknowledge. I mean to live or die by it, as fate decides.”

He paused and looked around him. Silence still greeted his bold words and the smile still played on Krishna’s lips. Duryodhana drew a breath and resumed, “As for Indraprastha, I know my father gave it to the sons of Pandu, when the Kuru kingdom was divided. I was against what he did then, but I could not say anything. Today, I rule an undivided kingdom; Indraprastha and Hastinapura are mine. And as long as there is life in this body, I will not part with any of my lands.”

Now Duryodhana loomed over the sabha, dominating it darkly. He looked straight at Krishna and said, “Mark my words, Krishna, lodge them in your heart: I will not give the Pandavas a mote of my kingdom, not even what would cover the point of a needle!”

Duryodhana remained staring defiantly at Krishna after he had spoken and it was as if a shadow fell over them all. Then Krishna laughed. It was a terrible laugh, as none of them had heard from him before: at once, a mocking laugh, a sad and wrathful laugh and the Kurus trembled to hear it. Krishna rose, still smiling, but now his eyes were crimson. Somehow, Duryodhana faced the Avatara as he was then. It seemed primeval forces of darkness and light tested each other, as the Yadava and the Kaurava stood with gazes locked across that sabha.

Calmly, Krishna said, “If you really want a bed on a battlefield to lie on forever, you shall have one. You have always got whatever you wanted, haven’t you Duryodhana? So be it then; as you say, let fate take her course. Be strong, O prince, be firm. For in just some days, there will be such a slaughter that you

cannot dream of it. And in its bloody midst, you will meet the death you long for. You and all those that are with you.”

Krishna had not raised his voice. He spoke almost sadly, or at least, only with anger born of grief. “You dare tell me you have caused the Pandavas no suffering, that you are not to blame at all for what they endured these thirteen years. You dare. And in this sabha of wise men, who know you since your infancy, who know every sin you have ever committed. Well, let them decide whether any guilt attaches to you or not. I knew how fiercely you would argue today, Duryodhana, how glibly. That is why I came here and not because I had any real hope of convincing you to return to dharma. I am sure all these wise men have heard your clever arguments often enough. Now let them hear another point of view and decide which one is true.

You were consumed by envy when Yudhishtira performed the Rajasuya yagna. Already, you had tried to kill your cousins more than once, because you hated them from the moment they came home out of the wilds. When you saw the wealth of Indraprastha and the splendor of the Mayaa sabha, you could not bear your envy any longer. I am not sure whether it was you or your uncle Shakuni who decided to conquer the Pandavas at a game of dice. Probably Shakuni thought of it; it sounds like what he would prefer, a battle he could not lose. You would have gone to war if the choice were yours, that is more your nature.

Even if the plan was Shakuni’s at first, you embraced it readily enough. You did not protest that it was a perfidious way to quench your envy of the sons of Pandu: to humiliate them, to destroy them if you could. The plan worked well. Yudhishtira accepted your challenge, poor, high-minded king. Exactly as you had calculated, he lost his reason at this game that did not suit him at all. Don’t tell me, Duryodhana, that you believed Yudhishtira stood a chance of winning at dice against Shakuni. Don’t tell me the game was played in friendly spirit with no harm intended. You could have stopped the game, any time you chose; but it was not to stop that you had begun. You did not stop until Yudhishtira had lost everything and his very honor, that day. And you say you are guilty of no crime? Do you take everyone in this sabha for a fool?

As if the game of dice was not enough, you had your brother haul Panchali into this court. He dragged her in by her hair and all these great men heard what you said to her then, your cousins’ wife, how you called her to sit in your lap. And then, your brother, this grinning Dusasana, tried to strip that queen naked in this hallowed sabha.” Krishna’s voice was almost a whisper now, what he said

was reverberant. “And you tell me no blame attaches to you and you are an innocent man? Well, I have come here to learn how such a paragon of dharma like you, Duryodhana, chooses to fight a war in which millions shall die, brutally, when Yudhishtira still offers you peace.”

Krishna’s eyes blazed again, “You are no innocent, Duryodhana. You are the most evil man that draws breath in this world. Why do you try to deceive us, or is it yourself you need to deceive? Or do your sins weigh on you so heavily that you no longer know what dharma is? That you no longer see right from wrong, good from evil, darkness from light?”

They all shifted uneasily in their places to hear him; no conscience in that sabha, save Vidura’s, was clear. Krishna said, “Duryodhana, you are beneath contempt,” and fell silent.

Dusasana sprang up and cried angrily, “Duryodhana, you will be forced to make cowardly peace with Yudhishtira. It is clear that Bheeshma, Drona and our own father mean to bind us hand and foot, you, Karna and me and deliver us into this wily Krishna’s hands. Why should you tolerate their speaking to you like this in your own court? Who is Krishna that we must listen to his lofty judgements here? The world knows he is partial to the sons of Kunti. After all, they are his blood and not we!

Duryodhana was on his feet. He glared at Krishna for a moment, then, contemptuously, at the others. Without another word, but a hiss like an angry cobra’s, he stalked out of the court. In a moment, all his brothers, advisors and the kings who were his allies also left. The sabha was almost empty.

Bheeshma watched his grandson’s arrogant exit, sadly, knowing its full significance. However, he also felt a sense of relief, as if a long and heavy burden had been taken from him. The worst he had feared, the unthinkable, had happened; now there was no looking back. Bheeshma, who had served the House of Kuru for so long, felt his own end drawn near. At last, he felt perfectly helpless and almost glad of it.

He turned to Krishna with a sigh, “I have done everything I could to prevent this, but I see that I have outlived my usefulness. The hour of reckoning is here. Duryodhana is past saving. Doom has finally come to the House of Kuru; ah, Krishna, a sea of blood will flow. In all my life, I have never had such prescience of tragedy as I do now. Not just the Kurus but kshatriya kind will perish in the war that is upon us.”

He stared quizzically at dark Krishna, sensing the Avatara knew

immeasurably more of what he, Bheeshma, prophesied than he did himself. Yes, Krishna knew all about why the apocalyptic war must be fought; he had come to the earth to wash it with just this enormous bloodletting. Krishna stared gravely back at the tired old kshatriya.

Bheeshma sighed again and murmured, “Yes, the time is ripe, I can feel it in every cell of my body. The war will be the end of the world, as we have known it and the beginning of an inconceivably different age. Am I right, O Krishna who know all things?”

Krishna said, “I blame all of you for what will happen. You could have nipped this evil bloom in its bud. Instead, you nurtured it carefully and helped it grow until it chokes us all. If you could not kill him, why didn’t you lock Duryodhana away in the darkest dungeon? Are you so blinded by filial love that you still do not see who this prince is? He is a monster, a demon born into the world for its destruction. But there is one final hope I offer you, O elders of Hastinapura. Listen to me, I do not speak idly.

When my uncle Kamsa was a tyrant in Mathura, I killed him though he was my own blood. Since the world was young, the wise have said that one man may be sacrificed if he threatens the welfare of the family; one family, if it threatens the village; one village, if it threatens the kingdom; and the very kingdom if one’s immortal soul is imperiled.

I ask you to undo the evil you have nourished in this sabha. The method is simple, if drastic; but consider how much less drastic than the war you plan. Four men stand between the very earth and peace; you must sacrifice them. Bind Duryodhana, Dusasana, Karna and Shakuni and make them over to the Pandavas. Listen to me, O elders and save kshatriya kind.”

It was as if the Avatara tried fate. He still doubted the savage mission for which he had been born and sought any means to avoid the war he knew must, ineluctably, be fought. Dhritarashtra grew very still at what Krishna said. He turned to Vidura, “Go and fetch Gandhari. She is the only one who might still turn our son back to dharma.”

Poised and regal, her eyes bound as always, Gandhari came into the sabha. She allowed Vidura to lead her by the hand before the king. The Kuru queen said, “My lord, you have summoned me to the sabha today. What is the matter?”

“Duryodhana walked out of this sabha, insulting Krishna and all the elders. He will not listen to anyone, but is determined to have war with the Pandavas. He wants to ruin us all.”

For a moment, Gandhari stood silent before her husband. Then she said, "My lord Vidura, fetch Duryodhana back; say his mother calls him here."

When Vidura had gone, she turned to Dhritarashtra again. "I prayed the day would never come when I had to say this to you: this kingdom does not deserve to be ruled by an evil prince like my son. It breaks my heart to say it, but he has plunged us all into the depths of hell. And you, my lord, are most to blame. I begged you not to give such absolute power into Duryodhana's hands; but you are a doting father and you would not listen to me. You have made him king in your place, while you still live. More, you have walked down the path of sin with him, willingly. Even now, only your fear turns you back.

Dhritarashtra, you are the king of such a great kingdom. If he cares for them at all, does a good king make a prince like Duryodhana a virtual ruler of his people? Just think, wouldn't they rather have Yudhishtira as their sovereign? Wouldn't they have profited richly from it, wouldn't we all? Instead..." she broke off, as they heard Duryodhana's angry tread in the sabha. Gandhari turned, "Duryodhana, is that you?"

"Yes, mother, it is I. What do you want with me?" His voice was stiff with annoyance.

"I am your mother and all I can ever want is for you to be safe and happy. My son, it is neither easy nor pleasant to be the king of a great country. A man must first be a master of himself, before he can rule a kingdom. Otherwise, he will drag both his people and himself into ruin. How can anyone who has not conquered himself dream of conquering his enemies? Duryodhana, a man's worst enemies are within himself: his weaknesses. They derange his mind and he sees enemies all around him; while, in truth, he himself is his only enemy."

The mother held her hands out to her son. She said, "Don't you trust me, Duryodhana? This is I who speak, that love you most. But I will not lie to you or encourage you, when you rush toward your death."

Duryodhana made no move to take her outstretched hands. She sighed, let her arms fall to her sides again and said with deep sorrow, "My son, it is time you heard what I am about to tell you. On the night you were born, omens of evil besieged this city in warning. The feral creatures of darkness flocked into our streets. Jackals and wolves howled at us and vultures and swarms of bats wheeled across the face of the moon. Peals of thunder shook heaven and earth and gashes of lightning flared not from the sky to the earth, but from the earth up into the heavens. In many places, it rained blood.

That night Vidura said the child born to us would cause the end of the world, as we knew it. But I could not imagine my son would be evil. How could he, when I had always kept dharma? Alas, I was wrong and the omens were true.”

Her son stood before her, made of ice. As she described that long ago night, a smile flickered on his lips. He said nothing.

Gandhari begged him, “My child, abandon the thought of war. You have no right to put the lives of millions in jeopardy for the sake of your greed and your hatred. I know you think that Pitama Bheeshma, Acharya Drona and your Karna will vanquish the Pandavas. But your cousins have an ally who is greater than all these men, greater than the Gods, even. Dharma is with them.

Then, Krishna is with the Pandavas and Arjuna is one of them. These two, alone, can subdue Indra’s Devas and all the Asuras in patala. Don’t you know who they are? They are Nara Narayana. But how would you know that? You are so full of yourself and your own darkness. Duryodhana, if you won’t listen to anyone else, at least you will not ignore what I am saying to you. You cannot fight dharma, my son. Dharma is eternal. You, your brothers and everyone who fights for you will die.” A sob shook her. Her voice dropping to a whisper, she said, “And the earth shall be made pure again.”

Gandhari broke down and wept. Her son still stood with the same mocking smile on his lips. When his mother had finished, he did not say a word to answer her. He turned on his heel and, without a glance at anyone in the sabha, Duryodhana walked out again.

FIFTEEN

‘I AM NOT ALONE’

Duryodhana stormed back to his apartment, where Dusasana, Shakuni and Karna waited for him. He was shaking with anger.

“They will do anything, Dusasana. They brought Gandhari into the sabha to tell me to mend my ways! Can you imagine how I felt? Like a small boy being scolded by his mother in the Kuru court. And Krishna sat there with that maddening smile on his face.”

He swept a priceless crystal decanter of wine off a table. It smashed into shimmering dust on the black marble floor. Now he raged aloud, “Enough sanctimonious counsel! From Pitama, from my father, from Drona, from Vidura, from Krishna and now from my mother. I want to be left alone! Is any man perfect, that he lives his life just by dharma? What about Krishna? Is he so perfect? The world knows how many women he keeps in Dwaraka. He never hesitated to kill anyone who stood in his way, by any means he could, with weapons or guile.

He knows that life is not black or white; and neither are we. Men have never been like that. They have never done what they should, but what they wanted to. That is life! That is destiny. Always, there have been those too afraid to act, who tried to stop those who were bold enough to take what they wanted: to stop them with talk of dharma! You should hear my father now and, of all men, Krishna preaches to me. The hypocrite! I have had enough of the lot of them.”

Dusasana looked anxious. “If they brought our mother to speak to you, they will stop at nothing. Next thing, they will bind the four of us and hand us over to Yudhishtira. And the king will not stop them, any more. It would be the simplest solution; it is only we four who oppose their cowardly peace.”

Duryodhana was startled at the thought. Then, a slow smile spread on his face. “Krishna is as dear to our cousins as their breath; without him, they are nothing. And we, also, have much to learn from this dark lion Krishna.”

“What do you mean?”

“Krishna tells our elders to deliver us to the Pandavas, so there might be peace. What if we follow his advice? Take Krishna captive before anyone moves against us! And keep him here in Hastinapura as our hostage. I know how much

the Pandavas love this black cowherd, whom the world calls the Avatara. If we take him hostage, it will break their spirits. If we hold Krishna, they will agree to anything, even to the peace everyone wants. They will agree to peace on my terms.”

Dusasana said, “We must strike first and victory shall be ours!”

But just they four could not hope to hold Krishna. Some others were taken into confidence and a conspiracy hatched. Inevitably, word of the plot leaked out. Satyaki heard of it and stormed into the Kuru sabha where Krishna sat with the elders of Hastinapura.

“Duryodhana plans to take Krishna hostage! Dhritarashtra, your son has lost his mind.”

Vidura jumped up in shock. “Now we are doomed! Krishna, you must leave at once. We don’t know who all are with Duryodhana in this treachery.”

Krishna was not surprised or agitated. Mildly, he said, “It will not be easy to take me.”

Dhritarashtra was panicstricken. “Fetch Duryodhana here at once.”

Duryodhana stalked tensely back into the court. “Father, you sent for me.”

“Sinful child!” wailed Dhritarashtra. “Evil as you are, I didn’t dream you would stoop to this.”

“What do you mean, my lord?”

“You dare even think of taking Krishna a hostage? This greatest of men, the Avatara? Duryodhana, I knew you were vain and foolish, but I never realized you were mad. The Devas and all the rishis in heaven, together, could not do what you are planning to. Idiot child, can you hold the wind in the palm of your hand? Can you take the sun a prisoner, or carry the earth in your arms? Why, these things are easier than making this man your prisoner.”

Duryodhana stood defiantly before his father. Krishna said softly, “Duryodhana, you think I am here by myself. But look, I am not alone.”

As he spoke, the sabha filled with a thousand presences. Krishna said again, “Look, Duryodhana, I am not alone.”

Duryodhana saw the hosts of heaven and earth crowding his father’s court at dark Krishna’s word. He saw the Pandavas in armor, their weapons in their hands. He saw the brilliant Vrishnis of Dwaraka and Mathura. The Andhakas he saw and all the Yadava warriors, while Krishna said, “Yes, they are all here with

me.”

They saw the iridescent Adityas in that sabha and the eight Vasus. Then, Krishna began to shine like lightning, so they could not bear the effulgence of him. From his blinding body emerged the Devas, one by one and they were lucific, but pale beside the one they had issued from. They were dull beside the Cosmic Person Krishna had become and as small as his thumb.

The court in Hastinapura, dwindled to nothingness, saw Brahma, four-faced, on Krishna’s brow. On his chest, spanning infinite space, they saw the eleven terrific Rudras, masters of ages and galaxies. On the Avatara’s shoulders, they saw the guardians of the quarters, the Kshetrapalas Indra, Varuna, Kubera and Yama. Agni blazed from his fanged mouth. The Adityas, the Vasus, the Maruts and Devas were all contained in him and his tremendous laughter rang through the sabha of Hastinapura, through heaven and earth and all the yawning kalpas. Duryodhana fell on his knees, his eyes shut and his hands clamped over his ears. Still, he saw and heard everything, helplessly.

Krishna laughed. Now, in the palm of his left hand, bright as the first light from which the universe was made, stood the Yadava army with Balarama at its head. On the Blue One’s right palm stood Arjuna, the Gandiva in his hand, the Pandava legions behind him and Bheema, Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva at his side.

But these were just two hands of a thousand arms. Others held starry weapons, ayudhas that could extinguish constellations. He wielded the mace Kaumodaki, the sword Nandana, both spewing fires like sun-flares, the legendary bow Saringa; and, above another forefinger, wheeling silent and nitid, a sun compressed: the Sudarshana Chakra!

This was his cosmic form and his tusked mouth spewed tongues of flame as long as nebulae. Flames leapt from his eyes and nostrils. He was too terrible to look at and, like Duryodhana, most of the Kuru sabha shut its eyes; but not Bheeshma, Drona or Vidura, nor the rishis who had come to that court. They did not blink, but gazed raptly, in adoration, at the spectacle of spectacles. And he, the Lord, gave them the power to gaze on him, impervious; otherwise, a moment of this vision would have destroyed them. Those wise ones drank him into their very souls through staring eyes.

Then, a miracle: Krishna gave blind Dhritarashtra, who had never seen the world, sight and this vision of God to behold. Tears coursing down his face, speechless, the king gazed at immortal Krishna, so dreadful and so ineffably sweet. Even those whose eyes were shut tight in fear heard celestial music in that

sabha; even they felt the barely material flowers that rained on them out of heaven and smelt their unearthly fragrance.

Overwhelmed, sobbing, laughing like a child, Dhritarashtra fell on his knees and cried in an ecstasy to Krishna, “My eyes see! Oh, you are the Lord of heaven and earth, Dark One! I am blessed that you sat in my sabha and showed yourself to me like this. Yet, O Krishna, I have a boon to beg of you, king of kings. Having seen you like this, I do not want my eyes to see anything else. Take back the sight you have given me, let my only memory of vision be of you.”

Krishna granted him that. But now, the Avatara had assumed his Viswa Rupa for longer than the earth could bear. The planet began to quake. Tempests swept the oceans and the seven seas began to evaporate in boiling tides. It seemed that time was ending and the world would burst asunder at any moment. Terrified birds flew in wheeling alarm and wild beasts dashed frenziedly everywhere. People of the earth came running out of their homes, screaming. The palace of Hastinapura shuddered and would have crumbled in a moment; then Krishna reverted to his human form. He was God no more, but just the mysterious master of Dwaraka again.

Duryodhana was still on his knees, with his head buried in his arms. All the others had their gazes riveted to the Dark One. Krishna rose. He took Satyaki and Vidura’s hands and walked out of the sabha. Like a deep blue flame he went and all the kings and all the munis rose and followed him, as smoke does a fire. He neither turned his face to them, nor spoke a word. Kritavarman had seen Krishna emerge from the sabha and brought his chariot to the palace steps. Krishna went down those steps with Vidura and Satyaki; Kritavarman saw measureless sorrow in his black eyes that glistened with tears.

From the top of those steps, Krishna heard Dhritarashtra’s anxious voice, “Krishna, you have seen how powerless I am. What can I do when my son will not listen to me?”

Krishna had one foot on the board of his chariot; the people had collected in the street. He paused and said loudly, “I have done everything I could to bring peace to the Kurus. Duryodhana will have none of it; he says he will not give his cousins even land to cover a point of a needle. Now the king admits he is powerless to stop his son from having his way. There is nothing more I can say. I must go back to Yudhishtira.”

He climbed into the chariot. “Go quickly, Satyaki. I must say farewell to Kunti before we return.”

At Vidura's home, Krishna told Kunti what had happened in the Kuru sabha. He said grimly, "This nest of evil will soon burn with a conflagration called the Pandavas." He took her hands, "But I must leave you now and fly back to Yudhishtira. Do you want to send any message for your sons?"

Kunti's eyes were full of grief, full of fire. Quietly, she said, "Tell my sons that they are all kshatriyas and heavenly voices spoke when they were born. Their mother expects them to do what kshatriyas should. Krishna, tell Draupadi that no mother was ever prouder than I am to have her as my daughter."

A smile broke out on her gracious face, lined with the years. She said, "As for a mother's anxiety, I have none, Krishna, because I know you watch over my sons. Go in peace, my child."

She embraced him. He touched her feet and went to his waiting chariot. Krishna set out for Upaplavya with Satyaki.

In the Kuru court, Duryodhana uncoiled himself off the floor like a hamadryad. He roared, "Prepare for war! We shall have war at once! I will not sleep or eat until battle is joined."

Bheeshma cried, "Duryodhana, listen."

Dhritarashtra cried, "My son!"

Vidura and Drona tried to stop him, but Duryodhana strode away from them. Soon, eleven aksauhinis prepared to march to the field of Kurukshetra for the war on the crack of the ages.

SIXTEEN

KRISHNA AND KARNA

As Krishna rode out of Hastinapura, he saw Karna standing alone on the palace steps, gazing at the horizon. Krishna told Satyaki, “Stop the horses.”

The Dark One called out, “Karna! I must talk to you.”

Karna stood for a moment, looking doubtfully at Krishna. Then he came down the steps.

Krishna said, “Come for a short ride with me.”

Without a backward glance, Karna climbed into the chariot and they drove out of the city-gates and to some nearby woods.

“Stop, Satyaki, this will do. Karna let us take a walk together.”

When they had walked some way, Krishna turned abruptly and laid a hand on Karna’s shoulder. Karna raised an eyebrow in surprise. Krishna said urgently, “I know you well, Karna, I have watched you carefully. You are a man of truth, a man of your word and one of great courage. All your life you have fought against impossible odds and you have often prevailed. You are hard, but you are not evil. I know you are a master of the Vedas and the Vedangas. Behind the callous mask you wear is a learned man, who knows the subtle shades of dharma.”

When Karna laughed, Krishna held up a hand. “Let me finish, before you mock. You don’t deceive me, Karna, I know the man behind the mask. You are not what you pretend to be and shall never be. You are not like Duryodhana, Dusasana or Shakuni. You have a noble heart as few men possess; you have great character. You have ample wit and you know your friend sets himself and all those with him on a course to death. He walks the way of sin and you, who know better, walk with him. Why, Karna?”

Karna smiled, as he seldom did and his severe face softened. He met Krishna’s gaze evenly, “Why do you flatter me today, Krishna? I have not heard such praise from you, of all people. What do you want from me? Surely, it is what you can never have.”

Krishna murmured, “Perhaps not.”

Grave again in a moment, Karna said in his intense way, “If you really want to know why I walk with Duryodhana, I will tell you. What you say is true,

about the path he has chosen for himself. He treads the dark way of sin: perhaps, the short way of sin?

But I say to you, Krishna, there is no man on earth as noble as Duryodhana. I will never judge him as you or the others do and my reason is simple: I love him too much. The world spurned me because I was a sutaputra; but not once has Duryodhana even thought of me like that. To him I am never Karna the sutaputra, but Karna his friend. And I am as dear to him as his brothers, dearer.

Once I came to this city in search of a livelihood. I was finally an archer and I heard there was to be a tournament. The Kuru princes were to show the skills they had learnt from Drona, who refused to take me as his sishya, because I was a suta's son. Do you know the story of my life, Krishna? It has not been an easy life."

Krishna said nothing, only listened. Karna resumed, "I studied archery with Bhargava. Yet, I did not leave his asrama with his blessings, but his curse: because I was a sutaputra. When I came to the tournament in Hastinapura, I did not intend to announce myself as I did. Then I saw Drona and his pupils so smug with their accomplishments, especially young Arjuna. He was brilliant, all right, but I knew I was a better archer than he was. I could not help myself; I had to challenge him. Even after I had shown them my skills, they said I could not fight Arjuna because I was not a kshatriya. Then Duryodhana took my hand and made me king of Anga. I can never forget that day, Krishna; it changed my life.

I was overwhelmed and I said to him, 'I am in your debt forever. Tell me what I can do to repay your generosity. Let it be anything, my life is yours to ask for.'

He embraced me and replied, 'You are a great warrior; Anga is the least you deserve. I want nothing from you, Karna, but your love. Give me your heart.'

How could I not? Krishna, only two people have loved me like that. My mother Radha and Duryodhana; and it is for the sake of these two that I am still alive. I care little enough for my life; it has brought me nothing but anguish. But don't ask me to ever sit in judgement over Duryodhana, whatever he may do. I know a Duryodhana who is my friend, who loves me and who is the truest of men."

There were tears in his eyes. Krishna nodded, "The debt of gratitude, the most difficult thing to pay back on earth." Then, out of the blue, he said casually, "Karna, I suppose you have made your choice knowing who your real mother is?"

Karna was startled: how did Krishna know Radha wasn't his mother? Recovering at once, he said, "I never knew who my real mother was, but I dreamt of her. I sometimes felt she was a princess who lived in a palace beside a river; as if a dim memory of her has stayed with me. I must have been illegitimate and she cared more for her reputation than her child. She floated me down the river in a box; that is how much she loved me. She must have other sons now and has forgotten me like some bad dream she had once, briefly. But I have left all that far behind me. Why speak of it now? Anyway, what does my mother have to do with whether or not I stand with Duryodhana?"

Krishna was looking at him so queerly and Karna felt disquieted. But he said, "And besides, Radha is my mother, even if she didn't give birth to me. She loves me, she is proud of what I have achieved and that is all that matters."

Gently, Krishna said, "Your mother was indeed a princess and she did abandon you because she feared what the world would say and what her father, who was a king, would say. She was not married when she had you. But Karna, since the moment she floated you down the river, she has thought only of you. Yes, she has five other sons, as splendid as any mother could wish for. But her heart yearns for the beautiful baby she once abandoned. The baby born with the golden armor, her first child she lost. She pines for you, Karna."

Karna breathed, "If my mother is a king's daughter, I am a kshatriya! Small wonder that I longed to be an archer." He seized the Dark One's hands. "Krishna, do you know my mother? Is she alive? Who is she? Tell me!"

Krishna gazed into Karna's face, trying to decide if he should tell him the terrible truth. At last, he said, "Karna, your mother had five sons after you and your brothers are the greatest kshatriyas on earth."

For a moment, Karna did not understand. Then he whispered, "Five sons... the greatest kshatriyas. Krishna, do you mock me?"

Full of pity, Krishna shook his head. Karna clutched his hands more fiercely, "It cannot be!"

"But it is, Karna," the Avatara told him. "Kunti is your mother, the Pandavas are your brothers."

Karna's roar echoed in that wild place. "And my father? Who is my father, Krishna?"

"The God you worship every day, your Ishta Devata. Surya Deva is your father."

Karna swooned; Krishna caught him as he fell. When he came to his senses again, he began to sob helplessly, as he had not done for years. With such sorrow in his eyes, he said to Krishna, “Now I am certain that I am the most cursed man alive. Surya Deva is my father; Kunti Devi is my mother; Yudhishtira, Bheema, Arjuna, Sahadeva and Nakula are my brothers, my flesh and blood. And what am I to the world? An upstart sutaputra!” He laughed bitterly. “Now I know why Bhargava cursed me. He knew who I was: not who I thought, but more a kshatriya than I knew myself. But oh, how will I live with the truth with which you have struck me, Krishna? The Pandavas are my brothers and I.”

His face hardened. He wiped his tears and his voice full of suspicion, he said, “But you haven’t just discovered this, have you? You have always known who I am. Why do you tell me this now? To disturb me, so I will not be able to fight my brothers. Ah, you are a crafty one.”

But Krishna’s black eyes were full of love. “I tell you this, Karna, because I want to save your life. Not only that; I have an offer to make you, an honorable one. You know kshatriya dharma as well as anyone. You know that if an unmarried woman has a son, when she marries that child becomes her husband’s heir. You are a Pandava on your father’s side. Karna, on your mother’s side you are a Vrishni. You and I are cousins. Come away from this city of sin; come with me to your brothers. They will welcome you as the eldest of them. Yudhishtira will set his crown on your head; dark Pan-chali will be your queen.

They will make you sit in a golden chariot. Yudhishtira will lead you to it, Bheema will hold the white parasol over your head, Arjuna will be your sarathy and Nakula, Sahadeva and I will walk behind you in train: on the way to your coronation! Who is more worthy of being lord of the earth than you are? Karna, your dharma is as staunch as Yudhishtira’s. Your heart is as warm as Bheema’s, your archery as deep as Arjuna’s. You are regal in all your parts and I think you are learned past what anyone realizes, since you never flaunt your learning as other men do.

And more than any of these, you have suffered as not even the Pandavas have. You have had scorn heaped on you and lived with the constant pang of being a sutapura. Only men who have suffered know the value of compassion; above anything, a king must be compassionate.

You have lived thinking your mother who gave birth to you did not love you. She longs for you. Not seeing you, not knowing you, causes her more grief than you can imagine. Come away with me, Karna. Don’t look back, come now.”

For a moment, Karna stood staring at Krishna. Then he smiled, “Ah, Krishna, who could make it sound more enchanting than you? And I see that you do it out of love. But it is not as simple as you make it out to be. True, by law I am a Pandava, a Kaunteya and your cousin. But just the facts of blood cannot change the course of my life as it has been. Krishna, my mother floated me down the river when I was an infant. I could have drowned; but her reputation was more precious to her than my life. Such a woman is not worth calling one’s mother.

Atiratha found me, abandoned and adrift, as I am sure God meant him to. When his wife Radha saw me—she always marvels at it—her breasts filled with mother’s milk! She took me in her arms and fed me. Not Kunti, but Radha is my mother. Atiratha has loved me like his own son. My heart belongs with them; they will always be my parents.

Then, there is Duryodhana. How can you think I would abandon him? No, not for all the kingdom and wealth on earth would I betray Duryodhana. What you don’t account for is that I am a grown man; it is too late for me to change. My loves and hates, my friendships and enmities have already formed. The only way I can change them is to die.”

With pity and admiration, Krishna looked at this remarkable warrior. Karna said, “It is honor and fame that I live for. More than anything else, I live to fight Arjuna in what I have sworn shall be the last battle of one of us. If I join the Pandavas now, how will the world witness the duel we have both promised it? Above all, I am an archer and so is Arjuna. Each of us claims to be the finest bowman on earth. Mustn’t we discover the truth in battle?”

Krishna began to say something, but Karna went on, “I know what you want to tell me: that you, great one, protect the Pandavas and no force on earth can conquer them. I am not a fool that I do not know this. But honor demands that I fight my own brothers. My place is beside my deluded, doomed friend. I will fight for Duryodhana and die for him. I am fate’s plaything, its victim and have always been; not even you can suddenly turn me into her favorite son. It is too late for that, sweet cousin. If I betray Duryodhana now, I shall not only be time’s victim, but her clown.”

Krishna heaved a sigh and shook his head sadly. Then Karna’s eyes were full of fear. “How will I fight Arjuna when I know he is my brother? Krishna, did you have to pierce me with this savage truth? I have never lived in peace and now I will not die peacefully either. Yet, how do I hold it against you, when you are trying to save my life? But since you love me and since we are cousins, there

is one service you can do me.”

Krishna’s eyes were bright and moist. “Tell me what it is and I will do it.”

“Swear you will keep this secret, until I am dead. Yudhishtira will never fight me, if he knows we are brothers. He will offer me the kingdom he is fighting for and that would never do. We are kshatriyas, Krishna; we are born for battle.

As for me, I know I fight for a cause that is lost, before the first arrow is loosed. Yet, though I am doomed by my choice, I will stand with Duryodhana. There is a heaven above for kshatriyas who die on the field of battle; I aspire to that swarga. The earth holds no charm for me and my life is worthless, especially now, after what you have said. What use is living, when my heart is in pieces and I can never be sure of who I am? I prefer death, because I have never been comfortable in life. And my way to death lies clear before me: fighting Duryodhana’s hopeless war.”

“What makes you so certain the Pandavas will win this war?” asked Krishna.

“Why, my lord, because this war is to be a yagna, your awesome sacrifice. It is the end of the dwa-para yuga and the earth’s burden must be made lighter; the wise say you have been born for that. The rest of us are but players in your lila. You will be the ritvik, the high priest on the field of Kurukshetra and Arjuna will be your fire. The rest of us, Dhritarashtra’s sons, Bheeshma, Drona and I and all the kings who fight for Duryodhana, we shall be your havis, your offerings; we shall all burn.

I have dreams, Krishna. As I used to dream of my mother once, I now dream of the war of the Kurus and its end. Repeatedly, in my dream I see Yudhishtira, bright as a star, with a golden bowl of payasa in his hands out of which he drinks. I saw Bheema on a mountain, immense himself, glaring down at the world spread below him like a tapestry. I saw you, Krishna and Arjuna, like two suns, your light streaming down over the world. In my dream, I saw Nakula, Sahadeva and Satyaki clad in white silk, with garlands around their necks and jewels glittering on their bodies, to signify their lordship over the earth. They smiled at me.

But that is not all I saw. I saw the warriors of Duryodhana’s army, all of us wearing black and our heads bent, walking south, always south. Those who walk south in a dream never have long to live. Krishna, I saw the end of your sacrifice on Kurukshetra. Dusasana lay bleeding on the earth, his chest torn open; Bheema

stood over him and his lips were stained with blood. Drona and Bheeshma fell, killed by Dhrishtadyumna and Shikhandi. I was cut down by Arjuna's arrow and I fell. And at last, Bheema broke Duryodhana's thigh, as he swore he would and left him to die slowly, to pay in agony for everything.

I see it all as if it has already happened. Inexplicably, these dreams fill me not with dread, only elation. I am more than ready to die. I began my lonely journey the day I was born. I have borne my burden long enough; I am impatient for death to free me! There is indeed a swarga above for kshatri-yas who die in battle. I dream of that place, too; only there, shall I find my peace. Only there, will I find my brothers, my father and mother again. And then it shall truly be heaven.

But now, Krishna, I see in your eyes that you must be going. This is perhaps the last time we shall meet like this, kindly. When we see each other next, it will be as mortal enemies on the field of war." He paused and a wistful look touched his face briefly. Karna said, "But then, we shall meet again as friends, cousin, in Devaloka after I am dead."

Krishna clasped Karna to him and for a moment, Karna had tears in his eyes. He wiped them quickly and wrung Krishna's hand one last time. They walked back together toward Satyaki waiting in his chariot.

SEVENTEEN

THE PANDAVA SENAPATI

Exhausted by his embassy, Krishna came back to Upaplavya. The Pandavas were waiting anxiously for the word he brought. He greeted them warmly, but his face was strained and he said he must sleep a while, before he told them what had happened in Hastinapura. Krishna retired to his apartment. It was evening when he appeared again in the court of Upaplavya. Yudhishtira welcomed him formally and, when everyone was seated, the Pandava said, “Krishna, I see sadness on your face and it is not difficult to imagine what the news is from Hastinapura. But tell us what happened.”

Krishna said, “I fear your inference is true, Yudhishtira. My mission failed and our dream of peace remains a dream. I did all I could to turn Duryodhana back to dharma. But he was obstinate.” He sighed, “There will be war, Yudhishtira, you will have to fight.”

A spasm of anguish twitched on Yudhishtira’s face. In a low voice, he said, “Tell me everything that happened. I want to hear each detail.”

“I was taken to the sabha in Hastinapura, where the Kuru elders sat on their thrones and where Narada and Vyasa waited and other rishis, to hear the destiny of the world being decided.”

Krishna told them how the elders tried to convince Duryodhana to relent, how Dhritarashtra, Bheeshma, Drona and Vidura spoke for peace. He told them what he himself had said and Duryodhana’s angry reply, arguing his innocence; and how the Kaurava walked haughtily out of the court.

Krishna described how Gandhari came to plead with Duryodhana and how he walked out again in fury, without answering his mother.

Finally, smiling, Krishna came to the plot to take him a hostage in Hastinapura. For once Yudhishtira lost his composure and cried in a terrible voice, “For that he will die! My days of forgiving him are over. The earth is thirsty for the blood of these beasts and she shall drink her fill. War! Let there be war! Let there be war at once!”

Bheema threw his mace into the air. He ran to Yudhishtira and embraced him wildly. He roared, “War! At last, my brother cries for war! Nothing can save Dhritarashtra’s sons now. Arjuna! Karna’s blood will darken the earth of Kurukshetra. Sahadeva, my brother, my eyes will watch you spill the vile

Shakuni's blood and shed tears of joy. Ah, Krishna! This is the happiest day of my life, I feel I have drunk amrita."

Krishna said, "When I left for Upaplavya, Duryodhana had already ordered his army to march on Kurukshetra." He was grave again, "Bheeshma will be the Senapati of the Kuru forces, its Supreme Commander. Dharma is on our side, but let us never underestimate the enemy. Your Pitama vanquished his guru Bhargava in battle; first of all, we have awesome Bheeshma to face. Arjuna and you Shikhandi, who have sworn to kill Bheeshma, prepare yourselves!"

Krishna did not say a word about his meeting with Karna in the woods. Yudhishtira rose to address the kings who had come with their armies to join him. "We have done our best to secure peace, but Duryodhana will have none of it. The war we must fight is a war thrust on us, a war we never wanted. The time of trial, the ruthless time, is upon us. I thank you all for coming to help me in the name of dharma. Krishna, Lord, seven aksauhinis are yours to command. Drupada, Virata, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Shikhandi, Chekitana and Bheema could, any of them, lead our army. You must decide what role each one will have. I also want to hear my brothers' opinions, about who our Senapati should be. Sahadeva, child, you are the youngest, but the wisest in many ways. Let us hear what you think first."

Sahadeva rose and said, "My lord, any of those you named can lead our army, for they are all great kshatriyas. But to stand against Pitama Bheeshma, I would choose king Virata of the Matsyas. He is a seasoned soldier, his age and experience commend him."

Yudhishtira turned to Nakula, "Nakula, whom would you have as our Senapati?"

Nakula said with no hesitation, "Drupada, lord of the Panchalas. He is Bhargava's sishya and Drona's sworn enemy. Acharya Drona will play at least as crucial a role in the war as our Pitama. Drupada is a tapasvin, a master of astras; let him lead us into battle."

Yudhishtira said, "Arjuna, whom do you choose for our general?"

"Let youth confront age and triumph. Let Dhrishtadyumna ride at the head of our army. None better than Drupada's son to take fire to the enemy."

"Bheema?"

Bheema said, "If Pitama Bheeshma is to be their Senapati, ours should be the one who has sworn a solemn oath spanning two lives to be the death of Bheeshma. He, too, is Drupada's son. He is also a kshatriya. Let Shikhandi face

Bheeshma and keep his vow.”

Yudhishtira said, “If our army has so many warriors that are fit to lead us, it must indeed be a force to contend with! But night wears on now and we have a choice to make before we sleep. If I had to choose anyone to lead us into war, I would not hesitate but choose Krishna. True, he is younger than some of us; but can anyone match his wisdom? It matters little whether he bears a weapon or not. All our destinies lie in his hands and I will submit to whatever he decides. Krishna, you tell us who our Senapati shall be.”

Krishna said, “It is a hard choice to make. All the kshatriyas you have named could hold up the host of Devaloka. The Kaurava army will perish before any of them.”

“But who shall be our Senapati, Krishna? The soldiers are awake and impatient to hear.”

Krishna said, “I agree with Arjuna. Drupada’s son Dhrishtadyumna is the one to lead us into battle.”

That sabha erupted in cheers and when Yudhishtira sent word to the army, the men were jubilant. Dhrishtadyumna was the choice of most of them, as well. Krishna and Yudhishtira then decided on commanders for each of the seven aksauhinis: Bheema, Nakula, Sahadeva, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Draupadi’s sons and Abhimanyu. The other kshatriyas were to be free to fight wherever they chose. Tired as they were, those kings of the earth, the soldiers of dharma, turned in for the night. The next day would be a momentous one.

Yudhishtira was up before the sun and, with Dhaumya and his other priests, he worshipped the Gods. He performed the sacred rituals that must be done, before fighting a war. As he finished his worship and the sun rose over Upaplavya, the other kshatriyas emerged from the palace and made their way to the soldiers’ tents. The Kekaya brothers were there, Dhrishtaketu, Sreniman, Vasushena, Virata, Shikhandi, Drupada, Sudharma, Kuntibhoja, the new Senapati Dhrishtadyumna, Anadhr-ishti, Chekitana, Satyaki, the Pandavas and their sons, Abhimanyu and dark Krishna, resplendent.

Dhrishtadyumna went to greet the troops, then the camp at Upaplavya was struck. That endless force moved majestically on foot, horse-and elephant-back and in chariots, singing lustily, to Kuruk-shetra. At last, they arrived at fate’s field, where the war at the end of the yuga would be fought, the war that would change the world. It would end the old order, come down from time out of mind and usher in a new, bizarre age on earth. The warriors all raised their conches

and sounded them in thunderous unison; in an oceanic roar from a few million throats, the common soldiers shouted their exultation at the tremendous bass.

The Pandava army made fresh camp at the edge of the level field stretching away to the horizon; that place was transformed into a hive of activity. Dhritadyumna took charge of the arrangements. The site was measured and marked for soldiers' tents, tents for kitchens to feed that teeming army, tents for the kings and their guards. Krishna and Satyaki oversaw the digging of a moat around the camp, to keep wild animals out at night. With so many hands to attend to its every aspect, work progressed swiftly; in less than a day, Yudhishtira's flag fluttered above an established military camp, already functioning harmoniously. At the heart of the camp, was a mountain of weapons of every kind. Bows, quivers full of arrows, lances, swords, maces and axes of battle and a hillock of armor and finger-sheaths: for all to take from, when the fighting began.

The truth was that every man had been preparing for this for weeks. In the palace and in the camps at Upaplavya, kings, princes and soldiers together had planned meticulously how they would make their camp at Kurukshetra. Then they had waited impatiently for Krishna's return from Hastinapura, to know if the war would indeed be fought. When they arrived at Kurukshetra, every soldier knew exactly what he must do.

Yet, when later, exhausted by the long march and the day's hard labor, the men lay down to sleep under a slender moon, each one knew the war itself would be another matter. Then nothing could be predicted: not if they would ever see their families again, not life itself, from moment to moment, not though they fought on the side of dharma and that was an honorable way to die.

EIGHTEEN

THE KAURAVA SENAPATI

After Krishna left Hastinapura at noon, Duryodhana ordered his eleven aksauhinis to march to Kurukshetra the next day. The same night, he gathered his brothers and his intimate coterie together. He was somber as the hour of truth drew near, somber as one who, at least in his deepest heart, was aware of having incurred a greater debt than he could ever hope to discharge. But there was no turning back and if Duryodhana was anxious after Krishna's revelation in the court of Hastina, he gave no sign of it.

Evenly, he said to those he had called to his apartment, "Krishna has gone back to Yudhishtira without having fulfilled his ostensible peace mission. I know he wants war; he has always plotted for it. He will not forget to tell Yudhishtira how we planned to take him hostage. He will exaggerate everything that happened here and Satyaki will bear him out. Already, Bheema and Arjuna are keened for battle and now Krishna will break down Yudhishtira's last resistance. They have Virata and Drupada with them, who also want this war for their own reasons."

He paused, then said, "For years we have dominated them with strategy and guile. Now they are certain they can have revenge on the field of war. What they forget is that we have eleven aksauhinis against their seven. Krishna may be more powerful than anyone else in the world; but he has sworn he will carry no arms during the war. Long privation robs men of their reason. The Pandavas will find swift death at the end of their exile, for the folly of daring to fight us. And that will finish the contention that began when our cousins came out of the wilderness, as they never should have. When they lie dead upon the earth, we shall be undisputed masters of the world, as we were born to be.

Dusasana, my brother, Karna, dearer to me than a brother, let us not waste another day of this precious, fleeting life. Let word go forth that we march at dawn!"

The next morning, at crack of dawn, Duryodhana's army marched toward Kurukshetra. Weapons and armor glinting in the early sun, wave on wave of soldiers flowed in tide across the earth. Eleven aksauhinis, each with a great commander at its head: Kripa, Drona, Shalya, Jayadratha, Sudakshina, Kritavarman, Aswatthama, Bhoorisravas, Shakuni, Baahlika and Somadatta. Duryodhana stood among these kshatriyas, all of them ready to die for him and

watched his interminable legions wind their way out of Hastinapura.

The Kaurava prince turned to Bheeshma and said, “Look, Pitama, don’t our men seem like an unending line of ants?”

After months, he spoke in the friendliest tone to his grandsire. The others around them fell silent, knowing what Duryodhana was about to ask the Kuru patriarch. Duryodhana continued, “This is perhaps the greatest army ever mustered under the Kuru flag; and, to my mind, there is only one kshatriya among us who can command this force.” Emotionally he knelt at Bheeshma’s feet. “Pitama, I beg you, be the Senapati of the army of Hastinapura!”

Bheeshma’s face softened. Gently, he said, “If you truly want me to command these legions, so be it, my child. But I have two conditions before I accept. The Pandavas are as dear to me as you are; I will not raise my bow to kill any of them. But I will harry their soldiers and their allies. I will kill ten thousand men each day we fight!”

Duryodhana said, “Pitama, you have no equal in this world.”

But Bheeshma replied, “That isn’t true, even if it pleases my old heart to hear you say it. Arjuna is a greater archer than I ever was. If anyone can kill me, it is he. But hear my second condition, before you decide you still want me to be your Senapati.”

“What is it, Pitama? There is no condition I will not accept to have you lead our army into battle.”

“I will not fight beside Karna. I cannot brook his arrogance, either he fights or I do.”

This was no more the Kuru sabha that Duryodhana could walk out of it. He turned pale. He had no answer to Bheeshma’s second condition.

But Karna said quickly, “I am happy with this condition! As long as Bheeshma fights I will not.” Then his voice grew softer, “But if Bheeshma is killed, Karna will come to fight for Duryodhana. Besides, your Pitama has granted me my dearest wish: that he will not kill Arjuna, but let me have that satisfaction. What else do I live for but to prove I am the best bowman on earth?”

No expression touched Bheeshma’s face. After a moment’s silence, he said, “I will command the Kuru army.”

Beaming, Duryodhana touched his grandsire’s feet again and embraced him. Word flashed forth that Bheeshma had agreed to be Senapati of the army of

Hastinapura and a sea of cheering rose among the soldiers. Amidst the solemn chanting of mantras, Bheeshma was given the ceremonial bath of consecration. Then he climbed into his chariot and rode to the head of that endless force.

NINETEEN

ON THE BANKS OF YAMUNA

Vidura and Kunti sat together in her apartment in his palace, both of them dejected. It was the day Krishna left for Upaplavya. In a strained voice, Vidura had been telling Kunti what had happened in the Kuru court.

“Duryodhana would rather see the world end than give up his obstinacy. Again and again, Yudhishtira asked to make peace; but Duryodhana will not listen. He won’t give back five towns, which are all your son wants.” Vidura sighed. “I have no doubt the Pandavas will win the war; but at what a cost. Blood will flow in rivers on the holy land. Perhaps, Duryodhana might have been persuaded by wise counsel, but Shakuni, Dusasana and that wild Karna are his advisors. I haven’t slept a wink these past few days, Kunti, thinking of the pass we have come to.”

Kunti sat listening, without saying a word. She knew how powerful her sons were. But she also knew the Kaurava army had four aksauhinis more than the Pandavas did. And when she heard that Bheeshma had agreed to command Duryodhana’s legions, fear clutched at her. What unnerved Kunti even more was the thought of her other son. Above anyone else, she feared Karna and her terror of him was heightened by guilt. When the exhausted Vidura left her, she told herself, ‘Not Duryodhana’s hatred for my sons can match Karna’s envy of Arjuna. Karna is Surya’s son; he is every bit the archer Arjuna is. He may well kill Arjuna, or Arjuna, him; either way, I will lose a son.’

She wept in despair then decided: ‘There is only one thing to do.’

She also retired for the night, which was a long and sleepless one.

The next day at noon, when the sun was at his zenith, burning down on the earth, with her head covered to protect her from the searing heat, Kunti went down to the banks of the Yamuna. Among the mirages that rose from the river, she saw Karna worshipping the Sun God. He stood bare-bodied, his arms raised straight above his head, his face lifted to the calescent star. Motionless he stood, chanting the Surya mantra.

Kunti approached him softly, her heart pounding. She stood behind him, unmoving. It is told that Karna was so tall and magnificent, she sheltered comfortably in his shadow, as in the shade of a tree. In a while, he lowered his arms, then his head and opened his eyes. Her shadow fell across his own and he

turned. For the first time Karna saw his mother, like a wreath of wilted lotuses and his heart gave a lurch. She stood before him, not saying a word, her head and face still covered. Gently, he took her hand and led her to a tree that grew at the edge of the water.

He folded his hands to her and said, "I am Atiratha's son Karna. This is the hour when I grant a boon to anyone who comes to me. I see you are noble and unused to the heat. Tell me, what can I do for you?"

She gazed and gazed at his face and at first made no reply. He saw tears in her eyes and they spilt over. She is uncannily familiar, he thought: her eyes, her exquisite hands, her regal bearing! But for the life of him, he could not tell where he had seen her before. For her, after the fateful day she floated him down the river in the wooden box, this was the first time she had seen him so close.

She dried her eyes and said, "Perhaps you know me, or then again you might not. But I have come to beg a boon from you."

He still stared at her, then he said slowly, "I cannot remember having seen you, but I feel I know you. Why, I feel I have known you all my life."

He broke off and stared more intently. Then he breathed, "It's you! The woman in my dreams. Of course I know you, I have always known you."

He knelt before her. She said, "I don't understand. How can you say you know me, when we have never met? How have you seen me in your dreams? I have time to listen, if you care to tell me. I have come to spend some time with you."

Karna did not take his eyes off her and his gaze scathed Kunti. He said, "I never told anyone except my mother Radha about the woman in my dreams and I never felt the need to. Today, I know I must tell you about her and about myself. Though Radha raised me, she is not my natural mother. One day, my father Atiratha found me floating in a wooden box on the Yamuna, an abandoned child. He brought me home to his wife and they adopted me. I never knew any other parents, never knew Radha was not my real mother, or Atiratha my father. For many years I was called only Radheya, Radha's son."

Gravely she listened to him, tenderly. Karna went on, "Since I was a child, ever since I can remember, a dream has haunted my sleep, the same dream over and over again. A woman would appear with her face covered and in sorrow and love, she would bend over me. Her tears would drip onto my face, burning me.

Still dreaming, I would ask her, 'Who are you? Why are you crying?'

Her voice choking, she would answer, 'I am crying because of what I have done to you, because this is the only way I can see you. But I am such a sinner that I may not speak to you even in our dreams.'

She would turn to leave. I would run after her and try to lift the veil that hid her face. I would cry, 'Show me your face! I want to see who you are.'

But she would vanish and I would awake trembling."

His eyes still searched her face. "As I grew, the dream became rarer and the woman hardly appeared any more. It has been years since I saw her at all. But I am sure it was my mother who came to me in my sleep. At first, she thought of me a good deal and she frequented my dreams. But later, when she had other children, she thought of me less and less, or did not want to; and she did not come any more.

That is the story of the woman in my dreams." He paused, then said, "But you look exactly like her. Who are you, gracious one? What is the boon you seek from me?"

Kunti could hardly look into his eyes, full of the years' long pain. She bent her head down, down and gazed at her fine hands. Then, quietly, she said, "It is true, I am your mother."

No expression flickered on his graven face. She went on without pausing, "I am the Pandavas' mother Kunti. You, Karna, are my firstborn son."

Karna began to laugh. He said, "Kunti Devi, mother of the Pandavas, has come to her son Karna to beg a boon! Surely, I am asleep and dreaming, for this can't be true."

He stopped. They stared at each other and then with a cry, she was in his arms, sobbing. Karna moaned, "You have come! At last, you have come and I knew that one day you would. Mother, how I have longed for this moment, how many times I have lived this day in my imagination. Why did you wait so long? You who bore me in your sweet body, by my Lord, my father Surya Deva whom I worship!"

She gasped. He said, "I know everything."

"How could you? When did you know? And once you did, why didn't you come to me?"

Karna said evenly, "I knew only yesterday when Krishna told me. But why speak of the past now? When, at last, at last, we are together! Let us not waste these moments. Come, sit near me and let me lay my head in your lap. This is a

perfect moment; let us not spoil it with words. Be quiet, mother, our time together will last just briefly, though I wish it would go on for ever.”

He laid his head in her lap and shut his eyes. Her hands were on his face, in his hair, stroking him and her tears fell on him. The Yamuna murmured along beside them, the only witness to their precious moment.

TWENTY

‘COME AWAY TO YOUR BROTHERS’

They sat like that, interminably, Karna with his head in his mother’s lap and his eyes shut. Neither knew if moments passed, or hours. Then Karna roused himself. He said, “Never in my life have I known such peace. I don’t know if hours have gone by, or years. But tell me why you came, for what boon? Radheya Karna waits to hear what you want from him. He is impatient to do anything for his mother.”

Kunti said, “Don’t say Radheya any more, my son. Say Kaunteya Karna. You are Kunti’s first son and she is proud of you. Kunti has six sons now, not five and she cries for joy.”

But he stopped her lips with his hand. He was trembling. “You make me cry as well, mother, because I long to be called Kaunteya too. But that cannot be in this life. Karna is Radheya and Radheya he must remain. No more of that; tell me what you came for. If it doesn’t taint my honor and it is in my power to give, you shall have it, be it anything.”

Kunti said, “You have suffered such indignity, such shame: because the world never knew you are Kunti’s son and Surya Deva’s. Your time of torment is over, my child. You hated your brothers, never knowing who they were. Put all that behind you; now you know the truth, you cannot fight the Pandavas. Come with me, I will take you to them. They will worship you and make you lord of the earth. From today, your destiny lies with them; you must leave Duryodhana and come with me. This is the boon I came to beg.”

A wry, familiar smile was on Karna’s lips, “Strangest times are upon us! These last two days, two of the noblest ones alive have offered me the earth. Both say that Yudhishtira himself will serve me. But, tell me mother, what will really happen if I do come away with you?”

Without hesitation, she said, “Your brother Arjuna will fall at your feet and the hatred between you will vanish like darkness before the sun. The Pandavas will win the war and the world will be yours to rule, because you are my eldest son. Karna will not be a sutaputra any more, but the emperor of Bharatavarsha. All your shame and suffering will be paid back to you in honor and glory! Come away with me.”

Suddenly, the disk of the sun on the river grew blinding. Kunti and Karna

were swathed in uncanny light, dazzled. A voice spoke out of heaven, earth and river, the voice of Surya Deva, Lord of the day. “My son, do as your mother asks. Long shall you live and be master of the earth.”

Karna jumped up with a cry, but the unworldly radiance faded in a moment. Karna stood staring at Kunti. Slowly, he said, “Mother, you have no idea how much I hated you all these years. I told myself I would abuse you if I ever saw you, because you were to blame for everything I suffered.” He took her hands, “But now I see you before me, your eyes full of tears and all I feel is this great love, which I can hardly believe that I, Karna, am feeling. That and a sadness I cannot describe.

I have loved my mother Radha as I have loved no one else. But even my love for her pales before what I feel for you.”

He went on, “A tide of love for my brothers overwhelms me. I, who am so used to hatred, find this hard to bear! How will I deal with this terrible love that tears at my heart?”

With a cry, Kunti embraced him, as if to clasp him back into her mother’s body. From above, Karna’s father, the westering Surya Deva, watched them.

TWENTY-ONE FOR LOVE OF HIS FRIEND

Kunti said, “Come with me to your brothers.”

Karna’s powerful body shook with sobs. “No! I must not even think of it.”

“Why do you say that? You know the truth now, come away to your brothers. Surely, you don’t mean to fight them when you know who they are.”

He gazed out across the rippling Yamuna, her currents livid with the light of the setting sun. His face turned from her, he said, “Yes, I do mean to fight them, because I cannot abandon Duryodhana. All these years, when the stigma of being a sutaputra attached to me, only he stood with me. He gave me his love, never holding back. He set me beside him in the sabha of Hastinapura and when the war is over, he means to share the earth with me.

My life has been harsher than you can imagine. I was raised a sutaputra, yet my blood raged that I must become an archer. Who has heard of a sutaputra being an archer? I came to Drona and begged him to teach me, but he turned me away because I was not a kshatriya. I took myself to a score of gurus and every one refused me; most laughed at me. At last, I went to Parasurama Bhargava and by now I was so desperate I had resolved to put an end to myself if he also turned me away. I lied to the Bhagawan, telling him I was a brahmana and he took me in. He was kind to me and generous; he taught me all he knew. But finally, when my tutelage was complete, he discovered that I was not a brahmana. Perhaps, with his seer’s vision, he saw who I really was and my guru cursed me.

Then I came to Hastinapura. It was the day of a tournament.”

He turned to her again; a shadow flitted across his face and there was anguish in his eyes. Kunti wept silently. Karna said, “You knew me as soon as you saw me, didn’t you? From my kavacha and kundala. Your mother’s heart would have known me, anyway. But you chose to say nothing, you did not come near me. I will not ask you what your reasons were; I do not want to cause you any more pain.

I was telling you about Duryodhana. When Bheema and Arjuna mocked me on the day of the tournament and Arjuna refused to fight me because I was a sutaputra, Duryodhana crowned me king of Anga. When I asked him what he wanted in return, he said to me, ‘All I want from you is your love, Karna.’

That is how it has been between him and me, since that day. My heart

belongs to him and he has loved me more than he has his brothers¹. I will never betray that love, not if I have to sacrifice my life for it.”

He sighed. “And until yesterday, it wasn’t hard for me to love Duryodhana and be loyal to him. But these last two days have been like two lives and deaths. Ah, mother, the truths with which Krishna and you have struck me are too fierce! Suddenly I feel no more anger or hatred for Yudhish-tira or Arjuna, but only this overwhelming love. You think you need to beg me to come away with you to my brothers. You don’t know how I long to do just that! I would give this life and ten more to be able to come away with you. Alas, I am cursed, the most unfortunate man alive, that I cannot.”

He fell silent and grew still beside the deep river. Kunti said in despair, “Why not, my child? Karna, I have always loved you. Whenever Arjuna spoke scornfully of the sutapura, I felt my heart would break. My son, have mercy on me. Your mother has borne the burden of her guilt for too long. What I made you suffer is unforgivable. But I was young and afraid of the world. See how savagely my sin has come to roost. Oh, my sweet child, all these years I have felt an emptiness in my heart and my other five sons could never fill it. I yearned for you, Karna. Today is the first day I feel whole and as if God has finally taken pity on me. Let both our torments end here. I have paid in full for my sin. Now I have found you, at last, I could not bear losing you again. Come with me, Karna, let us heal each other.”

She sobbed again. He took her face in his hands. “Though I long to, I cannot come with you. Duryodhana depends on me. You have come to me at this eleventh hour; he has always been with me. A thousand bonds of love bind me to him. Honor has always meant more to me than my life. What honor will I have if I forsake my friend in his hour of need? Your love seizes my heart and I ache to come with you to my brothers. But my heart is not mine to give; it belongs to Duryodhana. I am dearer to that man than his own blood and I will not betray his love. That he couldn’t bear.”

She began to speak, but he said, “Mother, I know why you have come today. You are frightened for your sons. You know who I am and you fear me. But you have no reason to be afraid. Duryodhana’s cause is doomed and with it all those who fight for him. Dharma is with the Pandavas; they must win this war and we their enemies must die. Besides, Krishna is with them. Who in this world, or any other, can stand against the Dark One? He is the Avatara; have no doubt the side he is on will prevail.”

She still looked anxious. He smiled, “You are most afraid for Arjuna’s sake

because he and I have sworn to kill the other. Kunti Devi, I will tell you why Arjuna must win the duel between us and why Karna must die.

First, when my guru Bhargava cursed me; he said that when I fought my most powerful enemy I would forget the mantras for the devastras. Then a brahmana, whose cow I killed, cursed me saying I would be shot down as I had his beast: when I least expected it.

And haven't you noticed a change upon me? My father's kavacha and kundala, which made me invincible, have gone. Indra himself came begging for alms at my hour of worship. He took my armor and earrings, so his son can kill me. Finally, now, Krishna and you have taken my greatest weapon, my hatred. You have robbed my mind of its strength. How will I kill Arjuna when I know that he is my brother, when I love him?"

Karna covered his face with his hands and sobbed. Kunti took him in her arms; she pulled his head down into her mother's lap. Thus they sat, for a long time, as twilight fell around them. Karna raised his face and said, "Stop crying, mother. You must not cry today, when we have found each other again. A son needs his mother's blessing as long as he lives. So bless me now, Kunti. Say my fame will last for ever and that I will find honor, at last, in heaven."

He prostrated himself at her feet and, with her tears falling on him, Kunti laid her hands on him in a blessing. Rising, Karna said, "I have never refused anyone who came to me at my hour of worship, whatever they asked me for. Yet, I have denied my own mother the boon for which you came. I will not send you empty-handed from here. I have a boon for you: not the one you asked for, but one that I give you anyway. I swear I will not kill four of your sons in battle: Yudhishtira, Bheema, Nakula and Sahadeva, none of them shall die at my hands."

She waited, breathlessly. He went on, "But Arjuna I must fight. We must face each other in a mortal duel and the world must know who is the better archer. Of course, now, one of us knows it is his brother he must fight and the other does not. No matter, either he or I must die. And when the war ends, you will still have five sons, as you have all these years."

Then he could not endure it any more and said hoarsely, "Now go before my heart breaks. I beg you, go!"

Kunti began to wail loudly. Karna embraced her. "What use are your tears now? For both of us it is too late. Not a line, not a word of what the Gods wrote for you and me can change. Our lives were already decided, long before we were

born: every moment of them, their last ones, as well. Don't cry now, uselessly; rather, pray for me. Pray that I reach the swarga where kshatriyas go when they die and pray that at least there I find peace.

I feel light! As if my grief has been taken from me, as if my sins have been washed away by my mother's tears, more sacred than the waters of this Yamuna."

Feverishly, he kissed her hands, her eyes, her lips. He said again, "Now go, while I can still bear it. It is late and no one must discover that you and I have met. Let these hours be as just another dream."

He had to help her to her feet and she stood swaying from the pang inside her. Again, they embraced. Sobbing, she clutched him to her. After a long moment, she released him, turned and, without another glance at his face,—for then she would never be able to walk away—Kunti stumbled blindly back toward the city. Karna stood turned to stone, watching her. Long after she was out of sight, he stood on.

TWENTY-TWO

BALARAMA AND RUKMI

Word reached the Pandavas in their camp at Kurukshetra that Bheeshma had been made Supreme Commander of the Kaurava army. Here, Dhrishtadyumna was the Senapati of Yudhishtira's legions.

While the Pandava force waited for Duryodhana's army to arrive on Kurukshetra, Yudhishtira received a visitor. Balarama came to see him. Yudhishtira welcomed him in some excitement. Had the great Yadava, perhaps, changed his mind about not fighting the war? Yudhishtira prostrated himself before Balarama and the other Pandavas did as well. Krishna stood by, his arms crossed over his chest and a slight smile on his face.

Balarama's eyes were red with wine. He was tense. Yudhishtira led him into his tent. For a long moment, the visitor sat silent, his gaze resting on all the Pandavas, in turns and on Krishna. When he spoke he seemed to address Yudhishtira, but his eyes kept straying to Krishna's face. The Dark One stood there, laconic, the smile never leaving his lips.

Balarama said thickly, "I hear a great war will be fought on Kurukshetra. I hear the kings of the earth have come here to die and their blood will flow in rills on this field. I have come to tell you I pray that all of you cross this sea of peril safely."

He paused, moistened his lips and continued, "I am told this war could not be avoided. Repeatedly, I said to Krishna, 'Be impartial to the Pandavas and the Kauravas. They are both dear to us; Yudhishtira is dear and so is Duryodhana.'

But it seems my words fell on deaf ears. Against my wishes, Krishna has decided to take sides in this war. He has chosen to be with you, though he will only be Arjuna's sarathy and bear no arms."

He gave a short laugh. "But Krishna doesn't need to carry weapons to give you victory. I know him, we all do. In his hands, the reins of Arjuna's horses will be more terrible than all the Kauravas' arrows. Poor Duryodhana, I pity him. What chance has he of winning, when my brother is against him?"

But I did not come here to tell you what you already know. Bheema, I see the questions in your eyes. Yes, indeed, you are my sishya and dear to me; but Duryodhana was always my favorite. Why, I love him as much as Krishna does Arjuna. But I will not be part of Duryodhana's army, though he has sent word

begging me to fight for him. How could I even think of fighting against my brother, however much I may abhor what he does?"

He drew a breath. "I mourn the ancient House of Kuru, at war with itself! I mourn the House of Kuru, which no enemy could ever bring down, but which now turns on itself and thus to its doom. Why, I mourn the earth, as we have known it; this war will be its end. Yudhishtira, I have come to tell you I am going on a tirtha-yatra, because I cannot watch this war, let alone fight in it. I cannot watch brother slaughter his noble brother. I am going on a pilgrimage, first to the banks of the Saraswati and then to a hundred other tirthas, to the very south of Bharatavarsha. And I will pray for you all, yes, I will pray for you all."

Suddenly, tears stood in his eyes. Krishna stepped forward. Balarama rose and clasped his brother in his arms. Choking back his grief, he blessed the five Pandavas. Abruptly, the mighty Yadava stalked out and rode away from Kurukshetra. Krishna had tears in his eyes, too and memories of a wild and wonderful childhood and youth spent with Balarama in the green arms of a virgin forest: enchanted Vrindavana on the banks of the midnight-blue Yamuna.

At about that time, another kshatriya came to Yudhishtira, unexpectedly. Rukmi of Vidarbha, Krishna's brother-in-law and his sworn enemy, arrived in Kurukshetra with an aksauhini of his own. The world knew how Krishna had once humiliated Rukmi. The Dark One carried away his sister, Rukmini, on the day she was to marry Rukmi's dearest friend, Sishupala. Since then, Rukmi had secured Siva's blessing and had become a king of some conquests and influence. Yet, he was known more for his arrogance than his considerable valor; and today he came haughtily before Yudhishtira.

Yudhishtira received his visitor cordially. When Rukmi sat in the royal tent, he began to speak before Yudhishtira could ask what had brought him to Kurukshetra. Rukmi did not address Yudhishtira at all, but Arjuna.

"I have come to help you win this war, Arjuna! Fear the Kaurava army no more, I am here to raze it for you. Without your lifting your bow, Pandava, I will make corpses of Duryodhana's best kshatriyas. No matter if they have eleven aksauhinis or a hundred, they will not stand against Rukmi of Bho-jataka."

He smiled smugly around him, then, declared, "And when I have slain your enemies, I shall make a gift of the earth to you! Fear nothing any more, Arjuna, your war is already won."

Arjuna's eyes glittered. He glanced at Krishna, but his cousin was impassive. Tense as he was on the eve of battle, the Pandava flashed angrily at

Rukmi, “Dare you come here and speak to me of my being afraid? Rukmi, there are many kshatriyas here, twice as strong as you; none of them has ever mentioned the word fear to me. Who are you, that you dare speak of winning the war for us and of making us a gift of the earth? We have no need for the likes of you. You may stay or leave, as you please.”

For a moment, Rukmi sat very still. Without a word, he rose and walked out of the tent; he left Kurukshetra with his aksauhini. Rukmi rode straight to Duryodhana and spoke to the Kaurava in much the same vein. Duryodhana laughed in his face and the lord of Vidarbha returned to his capital, seething. Thus, Balarama and Rukmi were the only two kings of Bharatavarsha who did not fight the war at Kurukshetra.

The Kaurava army arrived on the banks of the Saraswati and made camp there. The golden river separated the two immense forces and their soldiers stared at one another across the water. Duryodhana called his cousin, Shakuni’s son Uluka.

“Take a message from me to the Pandavas, Uluka. Go into the presence of Yudhishtira. Be certain the five brothers are there; be sure Krishna is there and all the kings who are their allies. Then speak boldly to them, your head held high and your words ringing clear. Tell them Duryodhana says: ‘The time for bragging is over, cousins. We shall have no more words, but war. Thirteen years ago, you swore many oaths of the revenge you would take on me and mine. More recently, you sent back an arrogant message to Hastinapura with Sanjaya. The time is here when you cannot brag, or threaten me any more. The time for deeds is here, for keeping the oaths you swore so loudly. The time for arrows and swords and maces is here, the time for war, your time to die.’

Don’t be cowed by them, Uluka, their fame is greater than their worth. Speak defiantly, remember you are Duryodhana’s messenger.”

He took Uluka aside privately and gave him individual messages for each of the Pandavas and one for Krishna. When he heard what he must say to the sons of Pandu, poor Uluka trembled. But he had no choice except go; indeed, Duryodhana thought he was conferring a rare honor on Shakuni’s son by making him his messenger. With trepidation, Uluka set out for Yudhishtira’s camp.

TWENTY-THREE

ULUKA'S EMBASSY

Uluka arrived uneasily in the Pandava camp. He was shown into Yudhishtira's presence. All five Pandavas were in the capacious tent; Krishna was there, as well, with some other kings of their alliance. Uluka found his palms clammy with fear. He greeted the Pandavas stiffly and said, "I have come as Duryodhana's messenger. He sends word through me for each of you. But, Yudhishtira, I am afraid to deliver his messages; I fear for my life if I do."

Yudhishtira said kindly, "Have no fear, Uluka. A messenger is never to be harmed and I guarantee your safety."

Uluka drew a deep breath and said, "My cousin and king, Duryodhana, says to you and these words are his, not mine: 'Yudhishtira, you were my slave once and we dragged your wife into our sabha like a slut. Which kshatriya would have allowed his woman to be treated like that and let the insult go unavenged? If you were ever a man, Pandava, on that day you lost your manhood. We took it from you as Draupadi's shame.

You spent twelve years in the forest like a beggar. Then you spent one year as Virata's menial, a calling you are better suited to than kingship. And now you dare come back and challenge me? Yudhishtira, the hour of reckoning is here and fine talk of dharma will not serve you any more. This is the moment of truth and it will show you up for what you have always been: a common coward, cousin!'"

Uluka paused. Bheema began to rise, but Yudhishtira motioned him to hold his peace. Yudhishtira said, "Is that all, Uluka? You said Duryodhana sent messages for my brothers as well."

"He has. Would you hear them?"

"We must," said Yudhishtira, with a sad smile.

"Duryodhana says to Bheema, 'You, braggart, swore to drink Dusasana's blood. From what we hear, you have become a magnificent cook. Loudmouth, wielding a ladle and wielding a mace are very different things. Carving dead meat is easy, but we shall see how you carve my brother's heart. Since your skills at cooking have become such a legend, I can offer you work in my kitchen, if you like.'"

Bheema was so taken aback he sat mildly dazed. Uluka didn't pause for him to recover.

"Duryodhana says to Arjuna, 'As for you, Arjuna, who boast you will kill Karna, I hear you spent the last year among the women in Virata's court, teaching them to sing and dance. I hear you have become a eunuch, cousin. How can a eunuch even think of fighting Karna?"

Nakula and Sahadeva, their mother's darlings, have also found their true vocation with Virata. Boys, I could find work for you too in my stables and cowsheds. But then, you have sworn to kill my uncle Shakuni and his son, haven't you? I fear you will be meat for scavengers before I can employ you.

Yudhishtira, your lofty dharma has finally led you and your brothers to my quenchless army. Prepare to meet your God.'"

Uluka paused, red-faced; he glanced anxiously at Krishna. Complete silence had fallen in that tent. Krishna said smoothly, "I am sure Duryodhana sent a message for me, Uluka. We are eager to hear it."

Uluka hesitated. The Dark One said, "You have our word you will not be harmed, whatever message you bring."

Bracing himself, Uluka said, "Duryodhana sends this message to you, Krishna. 'We are not fooled by your magic trick in Hastinapura. You spoke brave words that day. You said you would destroy the world with Arjuna and Bheema beside you. Cowherd, this is not Vrindavana where you seduced the gopikas with piping and dancing. This is war and we are kshatriyas. We are not impressed by your ludicrous fame as the Avatara. We laugh at these grandmother's tales and at your conjuring.'"

The Pandavas looked like fire just kindled. At the insult to Krishna, Bheema began to get up again, growling. Uluka was certain his last moment on earth had arrived. Krishna nodded to Bheema to sit down.

Calmly, Krishna said to Uluka, "Go back safely to your cousin, Uluka and take him this message from me. Tell him Krishna says, 'Evil one, you have not lived like a kshatriya; at least, let us see you die like one. Duryodhana, you dare send such a message to me today because you know I have sworn not to fight. Otherwise, your army would burn even now like dry grass in a forest-fire. But Yudhishtira has asked me to carry no arms during this war. He says revenge belongs to him and his brothers and I have sworn to be just Arjuna's sarathy.

But I also swear, Duryodhana, my warrior's chariot will strike terror in your heart. Asleep or awake, you will see my horses. In your dreams, you will hear

their hooves drumming your death. You will see Bheema kill your hundred brothers. You will see him drink Dusasana's blood; and you will not be asleep or dreaming when the ghastly sight lights your eyes, though you will wish you were. All that the Pandavas have sworn they will do. You forswear yourself as you please; but their oaths are solemn and each word of them shall be kept.'

Take my message to your king, Uluka."

Bheema growled, "Tell Duryodhana Bheema hasn't forgotten a syllable of what he swore. Tell him to be prepared to see all his brothers die on Kurukshetra, his sons and nephews as well. Tell him when those gruesome sights darken his eyes and break his heart, he will remember this message bitterly. He will see me drink Dusasana's blood. Finally, he may hide himself in heaven, earth or hell, but I will hunt him down and break his thigh, as I swore. And he will die."

The smoldering Bheema sat down, much to Uluka's relief. Shakuni's prince was afraid that, at any moment, the son of the wind might change his mind about keeping Yudhishtira's word and kill the messenger.

Grimly, Arjuna said, "Your king is beneath contempt. He is such a coward that he has made Bheeshma his Senapati. Has he no shred of shame that he calls an old man to defend him? If Duryodhana thinks Arjuna will stay his hand because his Pitama takes the field, he is mistaken. I will kill my grandfather if I have to. If Bheeshma comes to fight, he will die. One by one, every warrior who fights against us, every kshatriya Duryodhana relies on to secure his evil purpose, will fall. And at last my brother Bheema will kill your king. Tell our cousin that Arjuna says the Pandavas do not make empty threats; what we have sworn, we will do. Let him be ready to die."

With these fierce messages, Uluka went back to Duryodhana. Night had fallen and Duryodhana's mocking laughter echoed among the campfires when he heard what Krishna and the Pandavas said.

He cried, "They are afraid! They know their army will not last a day against Bheeshma; I need no other other kshatriya. Arjuna speaks bravely, but his heart quails within him. I know him. He will hardly dare fight when he sees our grandfather take the field."

There was drinking and celebration in the Kaurava camp. Then, Duryodhana and his warriors slept; a sleep of those who felt more confident than they should have.

Across the darkling Saraswati, Yudhishtira could not sleep. Krishna and Arjuna sat up with him, while the moon rose over the river, setting her currents

alight in burning silver.

Into the silence of the midnight hour, Yudhishtira said, “Krishna, I feel sick at the thought of this war. Darkness has come over us all, Krishna, as if the age is perverted. How can I feel anything but horror, when I think we must attack our Pitama with arrows tomorrow?”

In rare anger, Krishna snapped at him, “This is no time for regrets! It is a great war you face tomorrow. You are the lord of this army. How will your soldiers fight if their master is so hesitant? For you there is no sin in this war, Yudhishtira, your kshatriya dharma is to fight.”

Krishna’s eyes shone in the firelight. “When I was in Hastinapura, there was only one voice I heard raised unambiguously against Duryodhana, Vidura’s. Bheeshma was there, but I heard no strong words from him against your cousin; nor from your precious Acharyas, Drona and Kripa. I thought to myself, aren’t the Pandavas also Bheeshma’s grandsons; why does he love only Duryodhana so much? Aren’t Yudhishtira and his brothers Drona’s and Kripa’s sishyas; why are the brahmanas so loyal to Duryodhana? If your Pitama loved you as much as he should, Yudhishtira, would he agree to be Duryodhana’s Senapati? I hear the only condition he made was that Karna would not fight beside him.”

It is uncertain if what Krishna said was more for Yudhishtira to hear, or Arjuna. Yudhishtira said, unsteadily, “Arjuna, I spent thirteen years in the wilderness to avoid fighting our cousins. Bheema wanted war, even you did. I begged you to be patient and you were noble enough to respect my wishes. Yet, here we are on the brink of this hideous war. Oh, my brother, the kali yuga is upon us and the God of wrath has been born into the world.” He sobbed, “How will we kill our grandfather and our gurus, whom we have worshipped all these years? Whatever you might say, Krishna, this is a sin!

To console Yudhishtira, Arjuna said, “There is no sin in fighting those who have decided to kill us anyway. Our Pitama, Drona and Kripa know the goodness of your heart and that yours is the way of dharma, but they have cast their lot with Duryodhana. Couldn’t they have joined us instead? We must not falter now. Once the river flows down the mountain where it springs, it must run on into the sea. The river does not turn back and neither can we. Don’t grieve any more, my noble brother, but sleep now. Tomorrow is a momentous day and you must be strong for all our sakes.”

Krishna’s heart was full of thoughts too deep to plumb. As always, he was alone with them.

BOOK SIX,
BHEESHMA PARVA

**AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi
Saraswathi and say *Jaya***

ONE

SANJAYA'S GIFT

To the west of the field of Kurukshetra was the Pandava army, facing east, where the sun rose, facing the sea-like Kaurava legions. On the banks of the Saraswati and the lake called Samantapanchaka, Yudhishtira's soldiers swarmed. When the sun rose on the momentous morning, it lit a shining white parasol at the heart of the Kaurava force and coursed a thrill through the Pandava legions. It was Duryodhana's sovereign parasol. Even as a lover's blood quickens to see his beloved, the kshatriyas quickened at the fierce spectacle of their enemies and at the imminence of war. What other excitement was there on earth to compare with this one? Arjuna and Krishna saw the white parasol unfurled and raised their conches and blew on them: dawn thunder! The Kauravas replied at once with blasts of their own, loud cheering and ferocious shouts and Kurukshetra reverberated with the aggression of ten million kshatriyas.

The air was electric, when a formal meeting of some commanders of the two armies was called on neutral ground to lay down honorable conditions before the fighting began; so the war would be a righteous one, a dharma yuddha. They agreed that only peers should fight: archers would fight archers, warriors in chariots would fight other rathikas, mace-fighters would battle mace-fighters, swordsmen other swordsmen and so on. If any warrior withdrew during battle, or fled, he would be allowed to go unharmed and not pursued or shot in the back. If an attack was with words, so, too, would the reply be and not with arrows. No one who was unprepared or afraid would be attacked.

Flag-bearers, conch-blowers, drummers and their chariots, horses and elephants would never be harmed. There were other codes of honor, agreed upon and declared, which must be adhered to without exception. War might be a brutal contention, but it was a sacred thing as well. Once they agreed upon the laws for a dharma yuddha, the various commanders of the two forces withdrew to their camps.

At dead of dark, the previous night, Vyasa came to his son Dhritarashtra. That king sat alone and forlorn, faced with the inexorable conclusion of his long folly. He leapt up in alarm when Vyasa entered.

"Hah! Who is it at this hour?"

"It is I, your father."

Vyasa sat down beside his son and took his hand in compassion. Sighing, he said, “Don’t blame yourself too much, it is the nature of the times. Savage days are upon us and there will be a massacre such as the earth has not yet seen; finally, dharma will prevail¹. There is nothing you can do now to save your sons. They will all perish and the vain kshatriyas who have allied themselves to Duryodhana.” He felt Dhritarashtra’s hand tremble. Kindly, he asked, “Would you witness this war, Dhritarashtra? If you want, I can give your eyes vision.”

Dhritarashtra shivered at the thought. He whispered, “My lord, I have been blind all these years and I would not have my sight restored just to see the deaths of my sons. All my life my ears have been like my eyes. I will be satisfied if someone describes the war to me.”

There was a knock on the door and, as if by fate, Sanjaya entered his king’s chambers. Vyasa said, “Sanjaya will describe the war to you. I bless him with vision that only great rishis have. He will see the battle miraculously, every sword-stroke, every arrow loosed, every slaying and each death. More, he will know the warriors’ very thoughts; and be it day or night, he will see everything that happens on Kurukshetra.

Each morning, he will travel subtly to the battle’s edge and from there have use of his occult vision. No weapon will touch him, or tiredness lay its hand upon him. Every night, he will return to you and describe all that transpired. Sanjaya, you will never know tiredness and your memory will be like a God’s.” Vyasa sighed. “But you will seldom bring news to your king to gladden his heart. You will see all his sons killed, as the omens of the earth and the air cry out. You will bring Dhritarashtra word of how the Pandavas raze the army of Hastinapura and the torment of each day’s news shall be expiation for your king’s sins.”

The muni said more gently, “And in your time of anguish, remember that dawn comes after the night’s darkest yaama. The worst sinner finds redemption and the hour of retribution is the time when his Salvation begins. You, too, will find your peace, though you must first pass through fire to be purified. Remember that, when grief threatens to break your heart.”

Vyasa embraced his blind son. He passed his hands over Sanjaya’s eyes, blessed the sarathy as well and left. The next morning, Sanjaya stood on the field of Kurukshetra in a spirit body, light as air and with magic vision flooding his eyes, he saw all the happenings of the first day of the war. That day, Soma approached the realm of the manes². The seven large planets blazed as if they were on fire. The face of the Sun seemed to be bisected.

From now, it is from Sanjaya, the witness, that we hear about the

Mahabharata yuddha, the war at the end of an age³.

Sanjaya said to his king, Dhritarashtra:

‘Your son Duryodhana formed his legions into a fighting vyuha. He called his brother Dusasana and said, “Our first task is to protect Pitama Bheeshma’s chariot. He, by himself, will bring us victory. Let him be guarded by our best kshatriyas. There is only one enemy that our grandfather needs fear: Drupada’s son Shikhandi. Let our warriors kill Shikhandi as quickly as they can. And then who will stand before Bheeshma? I hear Arjuna watches over Shikhandi. Drupada’s sons Yuddhamanyu and Uttamaujas ride beside Arjuna. We must be careful of that force. Go my brother; take our boldest men, protect Bheeshma with your life!”

The day’s sun was still young and crimson on the horizon, when ten aksauhinis of the Kaurava force, six million men, were marshaled into an awesome vyuha of war, with ten commanders to lead them. The eleventh legion was deployed ahead of these ten and Bheeshma himself had charge of it. Yoked to a silver chariot, Bheeshma’s horses were as white as wave-froth. His banner bore a golden palm-tree with five stars above it. His hair was blemishlessly white, he wore white silk upon his body; and to look at him in his chariot, it seemed a full moon had risen upon the earth. The Pandava soldiers gazed at Bheeshma and were afraid.

The Kuru patriarch stood up in his chariot and spoke to his army; his voice was like the sea at night. “The gates of heaven have yawned open to welcome those who die in battle! I say to all of you, fight with no thought for tomorrow. Let your courage rule you, for glory is in store for every man here. A warrior does not wish for a peaceful death in his bed, of old age, or illness. He longs to die in battle! Know, then, mighty warriors, that for you there is no defeat on the field of war. For either dying nobly, you will find Devaloka, or victorious, you will inherit the earth! There is no defeat for those who fight; but only heaven or victory. So tell me, my friends, are you prepared to die?”

Like an ocean, they roared back, “We are!”

Only Karna did not answer Bheeshma. He had sworn he would not fight as long as the Kuru patriarch did. The aksauhini Bheeshma had chosen to be at the van of his army was Aswatthama’s. Bhoo-risravas and Shalya were part of that legion and seven exceptional kshatriyas formed a ring around Bheeshma to protect him against Shikhandi.

Duryodhana set his chariot at the heart of his army. His banner fluttered in

the early breeze, with its black serpent embroidered on golden cloth.

Seeing the Kaurava legions in battle array, Yudhishtira turned to Arjuna. “Duryodhana has eleven aksauhinis to our seven and only now I realize how much bigger than ours his army is. Arjuna, my brother, the enemy is formidable. How do you mean to deploy our men against Bheeshma?”

Arjuna replied serenely, “We will form our men into a Vajra, a diamond phalanx. Indra uses this vyuha; it is both a fluid and an impregnable formation, which maneuvers more quickly than any other.”

The Pandava army, of four millions, moved forward to face the Kaurava legions. Dhrishtadyumna was at the head of that force and Bheema was at his side. Yudhishtira rode at the heart of the diamond and Satyaki patrolled its right flank. A murmur went up from the Kaurava soldiers when they saw Arjuna ride out to take his place at Shikhandi’s side. The banner of Hanuman flew above Arjuna’s chariot. To keep his promise to Bheema, the legendary vanara had come to animate his image on the silken cloth: the form on the banner was alive; its eyes moved and saw everything!

Arjuna’s pale horses, given him by Chitraratha the gandharva, shimmered in the early light. But none of these was the most lustrous feature of Arjuna’s ratha, not even the kshatriya himself with the Gandiva in his hand like an arc of the moon. No, the sight of his sarathy drew a gasp from the Kaurava legions. With the reins in his left hand and a whip in his right, Krishna was like a dark sun risen on that field of fate.

Seeing Krishna and Arjuna⁴ in their chariot, Drona and Kripa knew this was no less than a vision of Nara Narayana they saw before them. In their hearts, they worshipped the vision.

Krishna brought Varuna’s chariot to the front of the Pandava army. Softly he said, “Be strong now, Arjuna. Bheeshma is the lion we must face first. It is him we must hunt, he is the one you must kill.”

TWO

KURUKSHETRA

When the two forces were face to face, a hush fell on them: a moment of stillness. All eighteen aksauhinis were like armies in a painting. Then, at the heart of that numinous silence, a strange thing happened. Yudhishtira peeled off his armor and put down his bow. He removed his sandals, climbed down from his chariot with the white banner and walked barefoot toward the enemy!

For a moment, no one moved. Then Bheema, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva all laid down their weapons and followed their brother. Krishna, who wore no armor and carried no weapon today, went with Arjuna.

When he caught up with Yudhishtira, Arjuna said anxiously, “What are you doing?”

Bheema asked hoarsely, “Where are you going, Yudhishtira, without your weapons?”

Nakula said, “You are making me afraid, my brother!”

And Sahadeva, “You are exposing yourself to the enemy!”

Yudhishtira did not look at his brothers. He strode on toward the Kaurava army. Krishna said quietly, “A kshatriya who seeks his elders’ blessings before he goes out to fight is certain to win his war. Your brother wants to get Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa and Shalya’s blessings, before he fights them.”

The Kaurava soldiers began to jeer when they saw Yudhishtira coming.

“He is coming to beg his Pitama to stop the war.”

“He has lost his nerve, seeing our army.”

“The coward.”

Yudhishtira walked on toward Bheeshma’s chariot. The ring of warriors around Bheeshma parted to let the Pandavas through. Bheeshma waited for Yudhishtira with a smile. The Pandava emperor, Dharma’s son, noblest of men, came up to his grandsire and, with tears in his eyes, prostrated himself on the earth at the patriarch’s feet; and so did his brothers. His old eyes teary, as well, Bheeshma laid his hands on their heads, then, raised them up and embraced them.

Yudhishtira said, “Pitama, we have not been able to prevent the war. I have

come for your blessing, so my brothers and I will win.”

Bheeshma said, “My son, victory already belongs to you. Krishna is on your side and where he is so is dharma. Alas, men are slaves to wealth and I must fight against you today. The throne I renounced a life ago has supported me all these years. My duty is to fight for the king who has kept me; but Yudhishtira, my love and my blessings are with you, because yours is the cause of dharma in this war. Jaya vijayi bhava! Fight and be victorious, noble child.”

Yudhishtira went to Drona and Kripa, his gurus and to his uncle Shalya. He prostrated himself before each of them and asked for their blessing and their permission for him to fight them. They gave both to the Pandava, warmly. To Drona, Yudhishtira said, “My lord, besides your blessing, I seek your advice. How can I win this war?”

Drona said, “King of dharma, victory is already yours. I hate to fight against you, but I, too, owe my livelihood to the Kuru throne. I cannot betray the king who has kept me these long years. Yet I do have some advice for you.” He called Yudhishtira nearer. In a low voice, he said, “I myself can only be killed when I lay down my weapons; it is a boon I have from my guru. Remember that when my time to die arrives, as it must during this war.”

Yudhishtira knelt again before his master. As the Pandava approached Shalya, Krishna saw Karna come out to look at the armies. Quietly, the Dark One sought him out. Taking him aside, Krishna said urgently, “I am told you will take no part in the fighting until Bheeshma dies.” He gripped Karna’s arm, “It is still not too late, Karna, come away with me now! At least for a few days, fight for the Pandavas. Fight Bheeshma, who has mocked you repeatedly and let the world see your worth. When you have killed the old man, you can go back to Duryodhana and Arjuna will fight you then.”

Karna began to laugh. “I am not a child, my Lord, that you can persuade me with children’s temptations!”

“We are all children of one kind or another,” replied Krishna.

Karna said, “I am moved to see how much you love the Pandavas and, perhaps, even me. But I have already told you, Krishna, my life and my loyalty belong to Duryodhana. It would break his heart if I did what you ask.” He laughed again to think of it. “Even for a few days!” Then, he was full of sorrow. “Krishna, leave me to my fate; not even you can change what was written for Karna before he was born. Go now. I thank you for your concern, but I am with the Kauravas.”

Krishna turned away sadly. When Yudhishtira had the blessings of his Pitama and his gurus, he turned back to his own army. As he walked across the empty ground between the two forces, a thought struck him. He stopped and turned back to the legions of Hastinapura. Loudly he called, "If there are any Kaurava soldiers who want to fight for dharma, they are welcome to join us!"

The Pandava's arms were opened wide to receive anyone who came to him. A lone voice called, "I will join you if you will have me, Yudhishtira!"

A fine kshatriya and a loyal childhood friend, came forward. It was Yuyutsu who, from his earliest days, had preferred the friendship of the Pandavas to that of his half-brothers; Yuyutsu, who had once warned Bheema that Duryodhana meant to kill him.

Yudhishtira welcomed Yuyutsu, embracing him; while, some way off, Duryodhana was tight with fury. Yudhishtira said loudly, so all the Kaurava army heard him, "At least now, when my uncle Dhritarashtra dies, he will have one son left alive to offer tarpana for him."

He glanced at Bheema, who shone ominously on that field. For a moment, the Kauravas felt a tremor of fear as they remembered Bheema's oath that he would kill Dhritarashtra's hundred sons. Back among their own soldiers, the Pandavas donned their armor again. They picked up their weapons and they were stern and fearsome to behold. They climbed into their chariots and their legions seethed around them. Conches were blown, trumpets blared; the drums of both armies rolled like spring thunder.

Duryodhana watched the Pandava army forming the formidable fighting Vajra and he rode up to Drona. The Kaurava said, "Here we are at last, my lord. The moment of fate is upon us, the moment we have waited a lifetime for."

Drona stared across Kurukshetra at the sea of men massed against them. Weapons and armor flashed in the sun, vivid banners waved; the whinnying of horses filled the crisp air and the lusty shouting of footsoldiers, to embolden themselves. Excitement swept the field, over both armies. Drona smiled at his pupil and said, "Yes, Duryodhana, the moment of truth is upon us. Do you see the enemy, all the kshatriyas?"

Duryodhana's gaze was riveted to the Pandava force. As in a dream, he said, "I see Yudhishtira's vast legions, Acharya, I see his jewel-like vyuha. I see your sishya Dhrishtadyumna at its head. I see Satyaki, his eyes full of fire, I see mighty Bheema and Arjuna in Krishna's chariot. I see all these matchless kshatriyas turned out against us and my blood thrills to the occasion. So many of

these warriors are your disciples. All your lessons will find final fruition today, as if this war is being fought for just that. I exult at it, Acharya. Truly, this is the most glorious day of our lives!”

His pale eyes ranged over the enemy ranks. “Look, beyond the front lines are Drupada and Virata, side by side, masters of experience. How youthful they seem, their faces flushed with anticipation. Beyond them are Dhrishtaketu, Chekitana and the lord of Kasi, breathless for the fighting to begin. Acharya, I see the pulse throbbing at their temples and they moisten their lips in eagerness. Beside them, are Purujit, Kuntibhoja and Saibya; flanking Arjuna’s chariot, are Drupada’s other sons, Yud-dhamanyu and Uttamaejas, so tall and bright. And, away to their left, another cluster of maharathi-kas: Draupadi’s brilliant princes, Abhimanyu a crest-jewel at their head.”

Drona listened to Duryodhana in surprise, that the Kaurava was so admiring of the enemy. Now, Duryodhana turned his gaze back to his own legions. He said, “But we are greater than the sea of men that confronts us, my lord. For here, we have you, Acharya and Pitama Bheeshma who has never known defeat in battle and Acharya Kripa and the tameless Karna. Aswatthama and Vikarna are with me and Somadatta’s son Bhoorisravas, who is as strong as a hundred men. These are just a few of the kshatriyas, who have come to risk their lives for my sake. If the enemy is a sea, Acharya, we are an ocean; and we shall drown them!”

Drona, the master, could not help but smile fondly at his sishya, so dauntless on the brink of war. Drona thought, regretfully, what a magnificent king this prince would have been but for his one overmastering weakness: his envy. Duryodhana was saying, “Truly, we have an ocean with us, my lord. Yet, to my mind, Pitama Bheeshma is our key to victory. The Pandavas will not contain him; the rest of us must guard him with our lives at all times.”

From across the Kaurava army, his fond grandsire Bheeshma saw Duryodhana, with Drona at his side. Bheeshma saw a frown knit Duryodhana’s brow and, wanting to hearten his favorite grandchild, the Kuru patriarch raised his war-conch and blew an echoing blast on it; then he threw back his head and let out a roar. Duryodhana turned with a smile and waved to his Pitama. But to answer Bheeshma’s bass, from across the battlefield, from the Pandava army, floated the crystal notes of an unearthly conch. That sound was at once beautiful and terrible and it shook the Kaurava soldiers to their very souls. In Arjuna’s chariot, his dark sarathy had raised the Panchajanya to his lips!

Now both armies erupted with conches of every pitch, ringing back and

forth across Kurukshetra. Arjuna echoed Krishna's clarion call with a long note of his own on the Devadatta. Bheema raised his Paundra to his lips and thunder rolled across the field. Yudhishtira took up the Anantavijaya and blew into the echo of Bheema's sea-call, a sound as tremendous as his brother made. Nakula and Sahadeva blew in unison on the Sughosha and the Manipushpaka.

After being taken briefly unawares by the Pandavas' conches, the hundred Kauravas raised their own sankhas and blew resoundingly on them. Without a moment's hiatus, they were answered by Kasiraja, Shikhandi, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Virata, Drupada, Draupadi's sons and Abhimanyu. All these kshatriyas blew on their great sea-conches at once; heaven and earth quaked at the sound they made.

THREE

A MOMENT OF CRISIS

As the multitudinous sound of conches shook Kurukshetra, Arjuna said to his incarnate charioteer, “Krishna, let us ride out some way between the armies before the fighting begins.”

Krishna coaxed his gandharva horses forward; Hanuman was a little lion-tailed monkey on his banner. A hush fell again on the two armies, when they saw Arjuna’s chariot emerge from the Pan-dava ranks on its own. The sea of men grew quiet, watching that chariot. They saw the warrior in it spoke earnestly with his sarathy, the dark Avatara¹. But they could hear no word the two exchanged; the space between the chariot and the legions was considerable.

A morning breeze ruffling their hair, Krishna said to his soldier of light, “Look, Arjuna, at the glorious Kuru armies! And the one we must fight, with Bheeshma and Drona at its head. Look at all the kshatriyas who have come to die at your hands.”

Suddenly, Arjuna grew very still, Krishna saw the Pandava tremble. Arjuna bit his lip and moaned. In an excruciating insight, he saw not enemies before him any more, but sires and grandsires, masters, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons and childhood friends! A sob tore its way out of Arjuna and he cried, “Krishna! My hands shake and my mouth is dry. My body shivers and my hair stands on end.”

His eyes were full of tears as he looked at the Kaurava army. Stricken with fear, Arjuna whispered, “The Gandiva slips from my grasp, my skin burns as if it is on fire. I see omens of evil in the sky and my head reels when I look at the enemy I am meant to kill. Oh, Krishna, what good can come from killing one’s kinsmen?”

Krishna realized it was best if Arjuna confessed what disturbed him so much; a yawning sense of destiny was upon the Dark One. He, too, shivered, knowing that he, Krishna, had been born for this moment between two armies, senayor ubhayor madhye, which divided two ages of the earth, more than for any other time of his life. It was the Avatara’s loneliest hour. Yet, he knew this was a moment of infinite opportunity, an hour of miracles, when he could speak to dim generations of the future. Arjuna was the key to this war. If Krishna could not convince the Pandava to fight, the cause of dharma would be lost on Kurukshetra

and the forces of darkness would have sway over the world.

Krishna knew that, though he bore no weapons to this war, he must fight now: a battle of the spirit, a deeper battle than any he had fought before. As the two armies on both sides froze in time, as if in a mural of war, evil, which had already seized Arjuna in coils of dread, clutched at Krishna with cold tentacles. Krishna knew the price of defeat if he lost this duel of the soul.

But Arjuna, possessed, ranted at him, “I don’t want victory! I don’t want a kingdom, its power or pleasures. Of what use is a kingdom, or life itself? Men who could be my father and grandfather, others that are my masters, uncles, nephews and cousins—with whom, for whom, I could enjoy a kingdom—stand armed to fight us to the death. I cannot bear it!

Even if they kill me, how can I think of harming them? No, I don’t want this terrible war. I would not have it if it were for the throne of the three worlds, how much less for a miserable earthly kingdom. How can I even dream of killing Dhritarashtra’s sons? They are my cousins. Let them be the most monstrous men. I shall be worse than they are if I kill them; my crime shall be more horrible than any of theirs. How can I dare spill the same blood that flows in their bodies and mine, blood that unites us? How will I ever find peace again?

Even if they are demented with envy and greed, even if they see no fault in murdering family, or in being treacherous to childhood friends, should we imitate them? Shouldn’t we know the sin in this hideous thing and shun it?”

Krishna said nothing yet. He saw what Arjuna did not: that this battlefield trembled on the verge between one age and another; both were unsteady now. Arjuna burned with anxiety. He swayed in his chariot like a green sapling in the wind. Helplessly, he said, “When a noble house like ours is divided by war, it is ruined. The old ways are forgotten, the ancient rituals and truths. And when laws perish, evil and vice take all the clan. You know what happens then; the women become loose, castes are mixed and the age turns dark.

My Lord, it is straight to hell that such a clan goes, first of all, those who began its destruction. Because the spirits of the manes fall from heaven! The sacred covenants are broken and all the generations of such a house are doomed to hell. What a heinous sin you and I have plotted: to murder our family out of greed for a throne. Instead, let Duryodhana kill me in battle while I am unarmed and unresisting!”

Arjuna sat down in the chariot, buried his head in his hands and wept. Krishna realized he must answer the Pandava, coax him out of his despair, or all

would be lost. As calmly as he could, he began, "From where this cowardly spirit at such a critical time? This is not for a kshatriya. It will not lead you to heaven, Arjuna, but to disgrace. Don't give in to this womanliness, it is beneath you. Cast it aside and arise, O Vijaya!"

But evil was truly upon the Pandava. He cried in anguish, "How will I attack Bheeshma and Drona with arrows in battle? When I should worship them instead! I would rather be a beggar in the world than kill my gurus. How could I dream of enjoying a kingdom stained with my masters' blood? When I see who the enemy is, I don't know if I would rather win or lose this war. This is not weakness; it is the strength of compassion. How could I live if I killed my cousins? Krishna, help me! Confusion roils my mind; my soul is weak with pity. I am sick with sorrow and fear. Teach me, my Lord, tell me what I must do."

Again, Arjuna sobbed. "No! Nothing can drive out the grief that dries up my senses, paralyzes me. Not unrivaled kingdom on earth, why, not the sovereignty of the Devas could rid me of this terrible sorrow!" His face grim, he said, "I will not fight," and fell silent.

Krishna smiled at him as at a petulant child. He said indulgently, "You grieve for those you should not, Arjuna; but you speak to me of wisdom. Wise men do not grieve for either the living or the dead. You and I and these kings of men, have always existed and always shall. Childhood, youth and old age are three stages of life and death is only the fourth: as natural, as inevitable, as the other three. Death is the stage by which the soul passes from one life to the next; with death, the soul assumes a new body. The wise are not troubled by this; because the soul, which pervades all the living, the aging and the dying, never dies itself. It was never born or begun; it neither kills, nor is killed. It is primeval and indestructible. It always was and shall always be.

As the body sheds worn-out clothes, so the soul sheds worn-out bodies. And just as we put on new clothes, the soul dons new bodies, as if they were its raiment. But the soul is not touched by fire or weapons, by wind or water. Inmost, subtlest element, always the being of beings, it is changeless, eternal."

Arjuna was still downcast, unconvinced. He had the uncanny feeling the words the Blue God spoke were meant for a multitude of listeners other than himself: unborn, yet avid listeners. As if their chariot out on Kurukshetra stood not just in their own time, but at the heart of all the swirling ages of men. Deep and secret futures swelled around them, gazed on them with a billion unseen eyes and brushed their souls with ghostly fingers.

Arjuna frowned. He felt he was alone on the bank of a timeless river of

light flowing from dark Krishna; flowing for him, yes, but not only for him. The Pandava sensed numberless presences gathering around and the pristine river shone at them, as well, to drink from its grace. Now Krishna began to speak in some hidden rapture; as if he played on his flute.

“Even if you believe the soul is born again and again and dies as well like that, still you shouldn’t grieve. For certain, then, is death for he who is born and the moment of it already decided at his birth; and equally certain is birth, again, for the dead. Why grieve for the inevitable? You do not determine when any man, even yourself, is born into the world. How can you hope to decide when or not he will die?”

Arjuna seemed to grow calmer now and to listen to his dark sarathy. Relieved that at least his warrior’s panic grew less, Krishna went on, “But this is not what is crucial. You are a kshatriya: for you, a battle of dharma is the highest fortune. How can you be so full of doubt at such a time? You should rejoice, Arjuna, the gates of heaven are open!

If you deny your own nature’s glory and do not fight, then you will sin. Through all time, men will speak of your shame; for a man like you, who knows honor, shame is worse than death. They will say Arjuna was afraid on the great occasion. Even your friends will scoff; think, then, what will your enemies say? Could anything be sadder? So arise, Pandava! If you die in battle, you will go straight to swarga. If you triumph, you will enjoy the earth before you find heaven. Fight Arjuna and I swear you will not sin.”

Lulled by Krishna’s voice, absorbed in his smile, his eyes, his presence of grace, Arjuna began to float away down the river of light. The sarathy now spoke softly, hypnotically, to the Pandava, touching his inner mind. As if in prayer, he chanted his wisdom, as much to himself as to his cousin.

In exorcism, Krishna continued, “Along the infinite way, no effort, even the smallest, is in vain or lost and no obstacle prevails. This is the wisdom of union, of yoga. Arjuna, I am with you. Free yourself from attachment to what you do; make no anxious difference between success and failure. Act! Act in purity, act serenely: even-mindedness is yoga; detachment and skill are yoga.

For one who is determined, his understanding is single and lucid. But the thoughts of the undis-cerning are many-branched, endless, endlessly confused.”

Arjuna was a portal to unborn generations, as Krishna’s words spilled through him, each a being alive, tender and rampant: a bright host of masters! They reached beyond him into veiled times, dim, dim, down mysterious trails of

history, taking fire to the hearts of bizarre and visionary heroes, who would one day walk a very different world and make war again. In his perfect passivity, while Krishna exhorted him to immaculate action, pure war, Arjuna became the Blue God's unwitting ally in another, older contention. He stood at a crossroads of the mythic universe and, listening absorbed, gave his astral body to become Krishna's prophet.

Krishna said, "The wise who have yoked their intelligence are freed from the bonds of birth. They reach Brahman, the sorrowless state. Arjuna, your mind is confused with all that you have read and heard. Your heart is bewildered. When true insight dawns on you, you will see beyond bookish Vedic learning and your spirit will be profound and unshakeable."

The earth received the Avatara's song.

FOUR

THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Sensing that Arjuna was calmer, Krishna paused. The Pandava did not tremble any more. Arjuna asked, “Krishna, who is the wise man? What is he like? How does the man of Brahman speak, how does he sit or walk?”

Krishna threw back his beautiful head and laughed. “When a man knows the bliss of the atman, his soul, all the cravings and torments of his heart vanish. And when his spirit is absorbed in itself, perfectly satisfied, he is wise, illumined.”

Arjuna saw Krishna exulted, his eyes shining!

“The heaviest sorrow doesn’t perturb him, nor does the most pleasant desire move him. When lust, fear and rage have left him, he is a Brahmarishi. The bonds of his body are broken; he is enlightened.

He who is beyond affection, who does not rejoice or grieve when he is fortunate or unfortunate, but is imperturbable: he is an illumined one. As the tortoise draws in its legs, the rishi withdraws his senses. Arjuna, the abstinent run away from what they desire, but desire does not leave them. Only the vision of God removes desire itself.

Even a man who knows the way can be dragged from it, because the senses are powerful and wild. But he who tames the senses, collects his mind in serenity and fixes it on me, he is illumined.

Desire springs from attachment to the objects of the senses. Anger springs from desire, confusion from anger and from confusion, forgetfulness. When he forgets the lessons of experience, a man loses his discrimination. Then, he is destroyed.

But when a man’s mind is disciplined, his spirit is pure. In purity, there is peace and in peace sorrow ends. The intelligence of a quiet man is established in the peace of the atman, his immortal soul.

What is night for most men, is when the quiet man is awake. And when the world is awake and abustle, is night for the sage who sees.”

Arjuna floated above the field of Kurukshetra, carried by Krishna’s spiraling song. The currents of that song were the tides of time. The ages roared around him in legendary magnificence; just the silver umbilicus of the Gita held

him secure. The dark charioteer sang on, “When a man becomes like the ocean, perfectly calm, when his desires come to him like water to the ocean and never move him, then he comes to peace. When a man works in the world without any desire, he comes to peace; and this peace is the ocean of the soul, the divine Brahman. Once a man comes into it, he does not return to delusion. At the hour of his death, he is alive in that eternal enlightenment. He attains the bliss of God.”

Darkness and doubt clutched at Arjuna once more. Evil would not succumb tamely to Krishna in the subtle battle he waged against it. This battle would decide the outcome of Arjuna’s war and those of a thousand more to be fought on the strangest fields by unborn heroes, in impossible futures, long before they were joined. Primordial evil battled dark Krishna for Arjuna’s soul: the soul of that rarest of men, an evolved disciple on the verge of final grace.

His voice full of despair, Arjuna cried, “Krishna, you say the way of the mind is finer than the way of action. Why, then, do you goad me into this savagery? You bewilder me now and I am lost! Show me one straight path by which I can be free.”

Though evil attacked his heart, Krishna spoke quietly. “The dual path has been taught in it since the world began: the way of gyana, knowledge, for men of contemplation; for men of action, the way of karma, of deeds, of battles. You do not become free by doing nothing; by abstaining from karma, you do not become perfect. He who does nothing, but broods over his desires, is no sage, he is a hypocrite. Do the work you are born to, for without working you cannot sustain even your own body. Let war be your worship, Arjuna.”

The dream closed around Arjuna. He was a time-traveler again; Krishna’s song was his vimana. His bright craft was rocked by the thunder of ages, buffeted by distant mysteries of violence and terror, by awesome miracles. The ship of light was proof against them all. Krishna’s song withstood the last tests of time.

“In the beginning, God made men, each with his own nature and dharma. He said, ‘By doing this you will prosper. The work of your nature will yield the fruit of your desires.’ By doing your natural dharma you worship the Gods and they nurture you. By working unattached, you come to immortal bliss. Such karma is the ritual that maintains the very earth. Look at me, Arjuna. I am not bound by any karma in all the worlds, nor is there anything in them that isn’t already mine. Yet, I am always working.

Only the deluded man thinks ‘I am the doer’. Everything is done by the

gunas, the essences of nature at their eternal play. Those who go astray become attached to their karma; they begin to take the gunas for the soul. But no wise man should unsettle the minds of those who don't see whole, because work must go on, always, or the worlds fall into anarchy."

Arjuna was entranced again, as the river of grace flowed from the Blue God.

"Every creature can only follow its innate prakriti; even the wisest man lives by his own nature. What can repression accomplish, Arjuna? It is always better to do one's own dharma, however imperfectly, than the dharma of another, even immaculately. It is better to die in one's own law; for to live by an alien law is perilous."

Like a child, Arjuna asked, "But what makes a man sin, even against his own will, helplessly, Krishna?"

"Rage and lust, ravaging, deadly: the enemies! Why, the intellect itself, deluded, feeds the fires of these two. Lust veils the soul as smoke does a fire, as dust does a clear mirror. To pass beyond lust, you must transcend the intellect. For powerful are the senses; greater than they are, is the mind; more potent than the mind is the intellect. But greater than intellect is the atman who sets you free."

Krishna's eyes were far away from Kurukshetra, why, from the age. Then, smiling, he said coolly, "I taught this yoga to Vivasat once. Vivasat gave it to Manu, Manu taught it to Ikshvaku; and, handed down the generations, the Rajarishis all knew it. Until the great yoga was lost in the world in a forgotten time, when darkness came. Arjuna, today, on this chosen field, hear the deathless secret from me."

But Arjuna looked at him incredulously. He cried, "Vivasat? He died long before you were born! How did you teach Vivasat the yoga?"

Krishna laughed. "My past lives and yours as well, are many, more than you dream; only, I remember them all and you remember none. I am not born into this world, but only seem to be; and I am master of my prakriti, my immortal nature and not its subject. Whenever evil dominates the world, I send myself forth into it: to protect the good, who else have they? To destroy the evil, who else will redeem them? To establish dharma I come, again and again, from age to age.

The man who knows me is never born again. When he leaves his body, he comes to me. Absorbed in me, he is delivered from lust, anger and fear. He is

burnt pure in the fire of my being; I become his home. All men come to me, at last and I deliver them all. Whatever path a man walks, it leads finally to me. I am not bound by karma and neither are those who know me. So like the ancients, who worked for moksha, you must also fight.

The way of karma is not easy, Arjuna and even maharishis are perplexed about action and inaction. Only the realized yogin sees restlessness in inaction and repose in deeds. When he acts, he remains poised in the serenity of the atman. He has no attachment to the fruit of his actions. Contented in the atman itself, he acts and is beyond karma. He is satisfied with whatever comes to him by chance. He is free from envy, untouched by success and failure. He acts and is not bound by what he does.

All his work is a sacrifice, a ritual of worship. His enlightened heart beats as one with Brahman, the Holy Spirit. For him, all things are Brahman. The sacrifice, the oblation, the sacrificer and the fire of yagna: they are all one and they are the Brahman.

And he who offers no worship; this world is not for him, then how shall any other world be his?"

When he heard the tone in which Krishna said this, another dread seized Arjuna, who had laid down the Gandiva and said he would not fight.

"Worship," the Dark One went on quietly, looking out at the motionless armies, "is greater than any material sacrifice and all worship ends inexorably in Brahman. Let the rishis of wisdom and vision be your masters. Learn from them by serving them, by worshipping and questioning them.

As fire does wood, wisdom burns karma to ashes. Nothing on earth is as pure as wisdom; on the ship of wisdom, the worst sinners cross over the sea of evil. He who has seen the atman, slowly but inexorably, peace comes to him. Take up the sword of discernment, Arjuna, cut away the doubt that lurks in your heart."

Now Arjuna looked into the Lord's face and saw his black eyes alight with compassion. The Pandava said, "Krishna, first you say renunciation is the way, burning karma with wisdom. Then you say the opposite, that karma is the way. Tell me, which is the true path?"

"Both," said Krishna, "lead to freedom. But yours is the way of karma. You are not greedy for kingdom or its power; that is half your battle already won, you will be freed easily." Krishna smiled, the crow's feet around his eyes cracking deep. "But, Arjuna, the wise do not speak of the ways of wisdom and action as

being separate, only the ignorant do. You cannot renounce action without knowing what it is. Only he who engages in karma knows its inner emptiness. Purified, he realizes the still Brahman. In detachment, he occupies the senses with the objects of sense, but not himself. He is like a lotus leaf, resting on water, but not wetted by water. The yogin does not act out of desire, but to make himself pure, to make himself wise.

In the city of nine gates, the body, only he shall have peace who has mastered his nature by giving in to it perfectly, without desire, renouncing whatever he does, even as he does it. He knows the soul does not act, nor is it acted upon; but just nature's gunas. Such a man's sins are cut away from him. He reaches the Brahman, from where there is no return. His wisdom illumines the immortal self.

When the soul's light ends your darkness, that light shines forth from you: the Brahman revealed, splendid as a sun. The enlightened man sees all creation equally. He knows pleasures that spring outside the self are ephemeral and they inevitably bring sorrow. He has no use for these. He is master of the surge in his blood of lust, of anger. He finds his joy within himself, his light within himself, in his own soul; and he comes to Brahmanirvana," said the Blue God, who had come to cleanse the world.

"Whose sins are put out, whose doubts are dispelled, to whom the welfare of every creature is his joy, finds Brahmanirvana. The austere man, set free from lust, anger and fear, is rooted in enlightenment. He comes to me, who enjoy all karma and all austerity, who am Lord of the worlds and a friend to all men. And he finds Brahmanirvana."

FIVE

THE SONG OF GOD

Krishna's song, the river of holy light, flowed through Arjuna and it made him see. He was borne away from Kurukshetra, into other realms. It even seemed to the Pandava that the war—why, all his life—was a pretext to be out here, now, in his chariot with Krishna and to hear his Gita. It was an hour of revelations, when ends more profound than he could imagine were achieved. Krishna was a sacred flame beside him.

The Dark One said, "He who works serenely, with no desire for the fruits of what he does, success or failure, he is the sannyasin; not he who lights no lamp on this earth. Arjuna, what men call yoga is sannyasa, no less. For no man becomes a yogin until he renounces his selfishness.

Karma is the way of the rishi who wants to attain yoga, to yoke himself to the eternal. Once he attains to that union, he is at peace. The warrior's way is his own will. The will alone is the soul's dearest friend and it is the atman's worst enemy. The restrained man's will is his soul's friend, but the self-indulgent man's will is his enemy. The rishi is absorbed in the atman. He is a master of his will, he is unchanging.

Arjuna, the light of a lamp does not flicker in a windless place. He who has realized the Brahman never wanders again from the deepest truth of his being. When his mind is yoked to his soul, set free from craving, the yogin is united with Brahman."

Krishna sent his peace to invade the Pandava. "When you gain the atman, you know there is nothing left to achieve. Then, no sorrow will move you: the yogin is disconnected from pain; he is one with Brahman. The body, the mind and the life are pure; the light shines through clearly. Infinite bliss is as natural as breathing to that man. The atman is plain to him in all beings, in all things and everywhere."

Tears filled Arjuna's eyes and ran down his face. Krishna said, "He who sees me everywhere, I am with him and he is with me forever. The perfect man sees all things in the image of his own self, equally."

Another spasm of anxiety struck Arjuna. He said, "Krishna, it is hard to see all things equally. The mind is fickle, prone to terror. It is impetuous, strong, obstinate and so are its passions. It is simpler to tame the wind!"

Krishna laughed again, “Who said yoga is easy to achieve? Remember it is the last achievement, beyond which there is no other. Yet, it is not impossible; I tell you, you can attain it.”

But Arjuna wanted to know, “Krishna, where does he go who believes, but cannot control himself? Is he like a cloud in the sky, with no support anywhere? Does he fall forever?” The Pandava’s face was pale. “Krishna, doubt grips my heart like an evil spirit.”

Krishna spoke like the sun now, radiating light. “Not in this world or the next does such a believer perish. A man who seeks Brahman never comes to a bad end. The bhakta who falls away from yoga is reborn into the homes of the pure and the prosperous, of kings, or into a family of yogins; the second birth is the rarer. From there, again, the soul treads the way toward enlightenment. Inexorably, the seeker’s belief takes him on. Arjuna, the man who worships me, to me he is the brightest yogin, more precious than the tapasvin, the gyani, or the man of karma. The man of bhakti is dearest to me.”

Like a temple bell calling him out of sorrow and futility, Krishna’s words rang in the morning. When Arjuna looked into his sarathy’s black eyes, he saw such love in them. He smiled wanly at the Blue God, as if he had awoken from a nightmare to find the sun risen and daylight in the world.

Krishna let his song taper into a silence full of mercy, which enveloped his warrior in a deep respite. Arjuna felt his fear recede. The Avatara gathered himself within his resonant stillness. As always, his battles were only beginning; and he was the eternal seeker. He knew that Arjuna he could save from his crisis of courage. But who would save Krishna from his long aloneness, from himself? Who would redeem him?

But then, deep destiny was upon him. He knew his Gita would change the very heart of the dreaming, myth-making earth; and it would change him, as well, in some incalculable way. It was as if, with his song to Arjuna, the epic of man was begun again, mutant!

Vision washed over Krishna. He saw his words percolate through Arjuna into the seeds of unborn generations, waiting, waiting to metamorphose, to transform the nature of mythic and fabulous time: the earth’s legendary heart. From them, his song redefined all the paths to freedom, all the images of the future: bodies of legend, the races of men, their nations, histories, wars, their every ordeal and, more than anything else, death and dying.

Krishna’s song flowed again, unknown, ineluctable. “Listen, Arjuna, to how

in yoga, with your mind devoted to me, you will know me. Then there will be nothing left to know. Among a million men in the world, perhaps one seeks perfection; of a million such, who do, each by his chosen path, perhaps one truly knows me. Arjuna, you know me, don't you?"

Otherwise, they would not be out here together.

"My nature is made of earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and ego: eight aspects. But this is only my gross nature. My other aspect is the soul and the world is founded upon it. It is the seed and the end of all things. I am the cause of everything, no other.

Like pearls on a string, the worlds are strung on me. Kaunteya, I am the essence of the waters, the light of the sun and the moon.

I am AUM and the Vedas, the sruti of the mandalas and the manhood in men. I am the sacred smell of the earth and the brightness of fire.

I am the life of all lives, the purity of the sage, the wisdom of the wise, the luster of the illustrious, the might of the mighty. And all creatures I am, of sattva, rajas or tamas."

Clouds had gathered in the sky. It would rain on Kurukshetra today. Great kshatriyas' blood and common soldiers' blood would mingle with rainwater and flow in red streams for a while—in scarlet rivers if Krishna had his way—before the earth absorbed it all and what remained was dried by the wind and the sun in brown patches of violent memory.

"It is the three gunas that delude, Arjuna; all this maya of life and death is because of them. Who makes me his sanctuary safely crosses the ocean of the world, the sea of samsara. Demons, evil ones, do not seek refuge in me yet. The virtuous that worship me, my bhaktas, are of four kinds: the man in trouble, the seeker after knowledge, the seeker after happiness and the man of discrimination. The discerning man is dearest to me. Why, he and I are one. Unlike the others, he comes to me after many lives, having realized that I am all there is. He is the rarest of the rare: the mahatman, the great soul.

Minds that are full of desire worship the Devas with rituals. I give them what their hearts want; I make their faith fruitful, whatever forms it takes. Those who worship the Devas go to the Devas, but my bhaktas come to me. Those who are confused think of me as my manifestations. They do not know my transcendent nature, Un-born, changeless and supreme. Arjuna, I know all the beings, those alive now, those of the past and all those yet to be. But who knows me? Only the illumined, who have died to sin. Those who are freed from

duality's delusions find sanctuary in me and are saved from age and death. They know the atman and Brahman and all about karma. They know that I rule both this world and the next and they come to me when they die."

Arjuna said, "What is Brahman, Krishna? What is the atman? And what is karma? Which is the domain of the elements and which that of the Gods? How can a man know you, as he dies?"

"Brahman is the imperishable. Brahman alive in the individual being is atman, the soul; and karma is the force of creation. He that thinks of me, as he dies, certainly comes to me. Indeed, whatever a man thinks of as he dies, he attains to that, absorbed in the final thought forever. He who says AUM as he dies, thinking of me, he attains the absolute: Brahman, the seer, the ancient, the subtlest, the supporter beyond darkness.

Those who come to me, Arjuna, never return to impermanence, to the places of sorrow. They have reached the final perfection; they are not born again. From Brahmaloaka down, all the worlds are subject to rebirth. But he who reaches me, never comes back."

SIX

THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Arjuna saw how Krishna shone between the two armies, a still blue flame, unearthly. In perfect calm, the Dark One sang his Gita, “He who knows the day of Brahma is a thousand ages and a thousand ages are his night, he knows day and night. At daybreak, all the hidden lives come forth to be born. At twilight, they dissolve again into the dormant seed of life; and again, helplessly, the same lives stream forth once more at dawn of Brahma’s next day.

But beyond this being and return, beyond the day and the night, there is another unmanifest, eternal Being who does not perish when other lives do. He is not born with Brahma’s day, nor dies with Brahma’s night. Those who reach him do not return. He is my abode. He pervades all this birth and death; he can be reached by bhakti.

Fire, light, day, the bright half of the moon, the six months of the northern sun: at these times, the yogins of illumination go to the Brahman.

Smoke, night, the dark half of the moon, the six months of the southern sun: these are when the yogins obtain the lunar light of Pitriloka, the world of the manes and they return to birth.

Light and dark are the primitive and enduring paths of this world. By one the yogin goes and never comes back; by the other, he returns.”

Arjuna did not tremble any more, but listened raptly to his sarathy’s Gita. Krishna said, “Arjuna, my song contains the secrets of knowledge and wisdom; it will set you free. This is the highest knowledge, easy, imperishable and known directly. It is my way, the way of the Avatara. I pervade the universe with my spirit; all things abide in me, but not I in them. This is my mystery. As the tameless air that moves everywhere abides in cosmic ether, the akasa, so too existence dwells in me.

When the ages have made their round, every creature is gathered back into the seed that I am. When the next creation dawns, I send them forth again, helpless, bound in my maya. I, the Lord of maya, send the multitudes forth and gather them back into my being.

The ignorant pass by this human form of mine; of me, they know nothing. The enlightened ones, the great souls that know me, worship me with an unwavering mind and with the rite of wisdom. They know who I am, that I am

the source undying.

I am the ritual, I am the sacrifice; I am the ancestral oblation, I am the herb that heals. I am the holy mantra, I am the melted butter; I am the fire, Arjuna, I am the burnt offering.

I am this world's father, its mother, its supporter and its grandsire, too. I am the end of all knowledge, the purifier. I am AUM, I am Rik, Sama and Yajus," whispered Krishna, humming to a spellbound Arjuna.

"The goal, the upholder, the Lord, the witness, the abode, the sanctuary and the friend am I. I am origin and dissolution, the ground, the refuge and the immortal seed.

Worship me, I am the heat of the sun. I withhold and send down the rain. Deathlessness I am and death; manifest am I and the hidden germ of life.

Worshippers of the Vedas, drinkers of Soma, stray from the path. They reach Indra's realm and enjoy the pleasures of the Devas. However, they are transients in heaven and when their punya is exhausted, they are born again into the world of men. But those who worship me, I secure what they have and bring them what they do not. Anyway, the worshippers of the Vedas and the Devas worship only me. For I am all the Gods and the Vedas, as well.

Those who worship the Devas go to them; those who worship the sires go to the Pitrs; and to the spirits go those who worship bhutas and pretas. And my bhaktas surely come to me.

Every offering made with love, I receive with joy: a leaf, a flower, a fruit and a palmful of water. Whatever you eat or sacrifice, whatever you do, offer it to me, Pandava.

I dwell in all creatures; none is hateful to me, none special. But those who worship me, they are in me, surely and I in them. Let even the most evil man but worship me and I will be with him; swiftly, he will become a muni and come to peace.

Arjuna, know one thing for sure: those who worship me will never perish. Let them be rich or poor, let them be men or women; let them be anyone, my bhaktas reach the final sanctuary."

Krishna's eyes twinkled at his friend. "How much more should devoted kshatriyas worship me in this impermanent, sorrowful world."

Arjuna was startled in his absorption, the song of peace snatched at his mind. Now the Pandava hung on the Dark One's every word; he was convinced

he must fight and he did not know if he would see the light of another day.

“Fix your heart on me,” said Krishna, “be devoted to me; love me and to me you shall come in life and in death. Arjuna listen, now that you have a mind to: not the Devas, or the maharishis know my beginning. I am their source.

From me came the Saptarishi and the four Manus and from them all these generations of men. I am the origin and so the sages worship me. I give them fixity of understanding. I light the lamps of their wisdom and dispel the ignorant dark.”

Arjuna said, “Krishna, you are the Brahman, first of all the Gods, Un-born, pervasive. Narada, Asita, Devala, Vyasa, all the rishis say as much and now I hear it from your own lips. And I believe it all. Not the Devas or the Asuras know your manifestations; only you know yourself. So, tell me, on which of your forms shall I meditate? Tell me, Krishna, your words are like amrita to me.”

Krishna said, “Hear my divine forms, but only some of them; because to all my forms there is no end. I am the atman in every being, their soul. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of everything that ever is.

Of Adityas I am Vishnu, of lamps I am the Sun; of planets the Moon, Maricha of the Maruts.

Of Vedas I am the Sama, Indra of the Devas; of senses I am mind, consciousness in the living. Of Rudras I am Sankara, Kubera of the Yakshas; of Vasus I am Agni, Meru of the mountain peaks.

Of priests I am Brihaspati, Skanda of the generals; of waters I am the ocean, Bhrigu among the rishis. Of speech I am AUM, japam of the offerings; and of ranges, the Himalaya.

Of trees I am the Aswattha, Narada of the seers; of gandharvas I am Chitraratha, Kapila among the perfect.

Of horses I am Ucchaisravas, nectar-born, Airavata of elephants; of weapons I am the Vajra, Kamadhenu among cows. Of lovers I am Kama, Vasuki among serpents.

Of Nagas I am Ananta, Varuna among the marine beings; of the manes I am Aryaman, Yama among judges.

Of titans I am Prahlada, I am time of measures; of beasts I am the lion, Garuda among birds. Of purifiers I am the wind, Rama among kshatriyas. Of fish I am the whale, Ganga of rivers.

Of creations, I am the Beginning, the End and the Middle, Arjuna; of sciences I am the science of the spirit, the dialectic for debaters. I am death that devours everything and the source of all, all that is yet to come. Fame I am among the feminine beings and prosperity, speech, memory, intelligence, firmness and patience, too.

Of hymns I am Brihatsaman, the Gayatri of mantras; Mrigasirsa of the months, of seasons I am spring. I am the dice-play of deceivers, I am the splendor of the splendid; karma am I and the punya of the good.”

Krishna smiled, “Of the Vrishnis I am Krishna, Arjuna of the Pandavas; of the munis I am Vyasa, Usanas among poets. Of kings I am their scepter, the policy of conquerors; of secrets I am the silence, their wisdom of those that know.

And, more, I am the seed of all beings, for nothing which exists without me. But what do you want to know all this for? There is no end to me, my friend: I support the universe with an atom of myself.”

Knowing clearly that Krishna’s Gita was more vital than the war before him, Arjuna said to his divine cousin, “Of those who worship you, Krishna and those who worship the Parabrahman, who has the greater yoga?”

Krishna replied, “Those who worship me are the most perfect yogins. And those who restrain their senses, are serene, compassionate to all beings and worship the Parabrahman: they, also, come to me. But surely, the task of these is harder, because the unmanifest Brahman is difficult for embodied beings to attain to.

Have no doubt, Arjuna, that I deliver my bhaktas quickly from samsara, this sea of grief. Fix your mind on me, let your thoughts come to me and in me you will live forever. If at first your mind wanders, meditate slowly on me, by stages. If you cannot do this, act in my name. If this is also impossible, offer your life to me, whatever it is. Better than gyana is dhyana, but better than dhyana is bhakti and surrender. Then, comes peace.”

Arjuna gazed at Krishna with such absorption that the Lord ruffled his hair like a child’s.

“He who has no malice to any creature, who is compassionate and friendly, free of egotism, always serene: he is my bhakta, dear to me. Who does not shrink from the world and from whom the world does not shrink, who is no slave to joy or sorrow, anger, fear or agitation, he is dear to me.

Who is pure, with no expectations, skilled, serene and has surrendered to

me: he is my bhakta, precious to me. Who is devoted, who does not rejoice or grieve, does not hate or lust, who has passed beyond good and evil; he is dear to me. Who is the same with an enemy and a friend, to slander and fame, in pain and pleasure, cold and heat; whose spirit is unattached, to whom praise and blame are one, who is content and tranquil, his speech controlled, his mind steady, who has no permanent dwelling: he is my bhakta and dear to me.

And dearest of all is he who surrenders to me in faith, with all his heart.”

Thus, spoke Sri Krishna.

SEVEN

THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Arjuna asked, “Prakriti and purusha, kshetra and the knower of the kshetra; what are they, Krishna?”

Krishna said, “The body is the kshetra, the field. The seeds of karma are sown in it and their harvest reaped. Munis say that he who knows the kshetra watches what happens within his body. Arjuna, I am the knower of the kshetra in every body. Discernment between field and knower is the highest knowledge.

Listen to the nature of the field and the knower.

Prakriti, the cosmos, first; then, ego, intellect, the ten senses—five of the body, five in the mind—the five subjects of sense, pleasure and pain, desire and revulsion, the entire organism, intelligence and will: all this is the field of kshetra.

Humility, honesty, non-violence, patience, self-effacement and the perception that birth, death, old age, illness and pain are evil; detachment, no dependence on a wife, children or a home and absolute equal-mindedness to pleasure and pain; unswerving devotion to me, a life in solitary parts, far from the crowd; constancy in the yoga of the atman, insight: all this is knowledge.”

Weightless, always on the verge of an explosion of freedom, Arjuna was carried upon the wave of light that crested Krishna’s song. The Pandava surrendered to the magic absolutely; it held him like its child.

“I will tell you how to reach the Brahman who has no beginning or end and is transcendent, eternal. He is beyond both what is and what is not. His hands and feet are everywhere, in all times; his heads, faces and eyes are on every side. His ear is this world and He lives in the world as well, all-enfolding.

He moves the senses, but is beyond them. He is perfectly unattached, yet supports the universe. He is free of the gunas of nature, but enjoys them. He is within every creature and beyond them all, always working, ever still, subtle beyond the mind’s grasp: so near us, so utterly remote.

He is one and with every creature, at once, creating them, nurturing them, destroying them and creating them afresh. He is the light of lights, beyond darkness. He is knowledge, all wisdom’s only object and its sole purpose, innate in every heart.

Nature and soul, prakriti and purusha, both have no beginning. The soul in nature enjoys the infinite essences in nature. Attachment causes the soul to incarnate in wombs of good and evil.

The witness is the Brahman in the body. He is the atman, the last self and the final experiencer. No matter how a man has lived, if he once experiences the Brahman directly, beyond nature, he will not be reborn.

By dhyana, some reach the atman, some by gyana and others by the way of karma. Yet others are ignorant of these three paths and they resort to worship. They, too, cross over the sea of death by their bhakti, their devotion to what they have heard.

All that live do so by the union between the kshetra and its knower, nature and soul, prakriti and Brahman. The man who sees God abiding in all things and all beings, God dwelling deathless in the mortal world, he truly sees.

The man who sees that only the gunas of nature act and never the atman, he truly sees. For the soul is actless. When a man sees that manifold, multifarious being is centered in just the One and how from that One it spreads, he attains the Brahman.

The Brahman has no beginning; it is before and beyond the gunas. Arjuna, the Brahman lives in the body, but it does not act, nor do actions touch it: just as the all-pervasive ether is untainted, immaculate, because it is so subtle.

Even as the sun does the world, the Lord of the field illumines every kshetra. The man who sees the difference between the kshetra and its knower, who sees the liberation of man from nature, he becomes free.”

Arjuna was awash on that sea of calm, the Song of God. Krishna’s song radiated shafts of light that pierced the marmas, the fine portals to the Pandava’s spirit and through him entered distant men in unborn times, on strangest battlefields. Arjuna heard Krishna within his heart, under his skin now, speaking to those multitudes, beginning his eternal work of Salvation again.

“Listen to the wisdom of ages. The sages on whom it dawned became perfect; they were freed from the bonds of the body. They became like me. They are not born at creation, they are not destroyed at the dissolution.

Great Nature is my womb. I cast the seed of all things into myself. Of any being born into any world, Arjuna, I am the father who casts the seed and prakriti is the mother. Sattva, rajas and tamas, the three gunas of nature, bring the deathless dweller into the body.

Sattva is pure and reveals the atman by blemishless light. Yet, sattva binds with attachment to goodness and to knowledge.

Rajas is attraction, passion sprung from desire and attachment. It binds the soul to the body with hunger for action.

Tamas is dullness, born of ignorance; it is blind delusion. It binds with darkness, sloth and stupor.

From time to time, age to age, sattva dominates, then rajas and tamas, too, prevailing over the other two gunas.

When the light of knowledge shines at all the body's gates, sattva prevails. Unrest and greed are the signs of rajas and complete delusion dominates when tamas rules.

If death comes when sattva prevails, the soul attains to the higher world of beings that know God. If death comes when rajas rules, the soul is reborn among those who live the life of power and action. And if a man dies when tamas reigns, he is born among the deluded, once more.

The good rise upwards, the passionate remain in the middle realms and the tamasic sink; they devolve down to the realms of darkness."

Arjuna felt a seismic disturbance in his heart. It was the labor of the ending of a yuga and the birth of another; and he could not fathom it. Krishna, who saw it clearly, Krishna, who had caused it, sang on to his bhakta. The ripples of enlightenment were on his lips and his depths were like the ocean's, unmoving. The Dark One calmed Arjuna, who was churned by the spirits of the two ages at whose very edge they stood, out on Kurukshetra.

"When the dweller in the body transcends the gunas that cause the body, he is liberated from life and death, decay and pain. He becomes immortal."

His terror quieted again, Arjuna said, "How do we know the one who is beyond the gunas? How does he live? How does he transcend the gunas?"

"He does not despise illumination, restless activity or dark delusion, when they prevail. Nor does he long for them, when they cease.

For him pain and pleasure are alike. He never wavers. For him a clod of earth, a stone and a bar of gold are the same; blame and praise are the same to him, because he is established in the atman's inner peace. He who has relinquished the initiative of action, but lives in harmony with his nature, he has grown beyond the conflicting gunas.

The man who is devoted to me transcends the gunas. He becomes the Brahman, because I am that abode of bliss.”

Krishna’s every word was a scripture.

“The everlasting Aswattha, the Tree of Life, has its roots in heaven and its branches down in the earth below. Its leaves are the Vedas.” He spoke in some wonder, as if his own birth’s greater reasons were being revealed to him, even now: the secrets of incarnation being laid bare to the Avatara. At the end of his lonely anguish, sublime calm stole over him.

“Like the banyan’s, the branches of the Tree of Life reach above and below, nourished by the gunas, down even into the world of men.

Its true form is never seen in this world: not its beginning, its end, or its nature. The bhakta cuts down the tree with the sword of detachment, saying, ‘I seek refuge not in the tree, but in the Primal One from whom this current of the world flows.’

He who is free of pride and delusion, who has conquered the evil of attachment, whose lusts are stilled, who is devoted to me, he who is freed of the opposites of pleasure and pain, comes to the changeless state.

Not fire, not the moon or the sun illumines the self-lustrous Being who is my abode. He who attains me shall never be reborn.”

EIGHT

THE SONG OF GOD

In the chariot between the two armies frozen in time by the Dark One's power, Krishna said to Arjuna, "In this world, the Avatara dons the five senses of nature and the sixth, of the mind: the garment of prakriti!

When I take a body and leave it, these come and go like the scent of flowers on the wind. I enjoy the senses, Arjuna, as you do and suffer by them as well. But they do not delude me. The splendor of the sun, the moon and fire are my own.

I nourish the world while I am in it. Then, as the moon, as precious Soma, I bring sap and water to the living world of plant and herb; as the fire of life, I nurture the bodies of animals. All the foods of this earth I consume and make inner and outward breath of them.

I am the heart of every man who lives. I am the source of memory and knowledge and their loss as well. I am the Vedas, the Vedanta and the knower of the Vedas, too.

Arjuna, there are just two beings in this world: the dying and the undying. The one who dies is all these changing lives and the undying one is changeless. But beyond both these the supreme Spirit, the Lord, pervades the three worlds and sustains them.

I am beyond both the dying and the undying beings. I am the supreme person, in the world and in the Veda. Blameless Arjuna, he who knows me becomes truly wise," said Krishna.

"If you want to understand this war, you must know the two different kinds of men who fight it.

Pure, fearless, wise, generous, self-controlled and sacrificing, knowing the scriptures, austere and honest;

Non-violent, truthful, relinquishing, serene, never finding fault, compassionate to all the living, free from greed, gentle, humble and steady;

Energetic, forgiving, patient, above arrogance and malice: this is the man with the divine nature.

Ostentation, vanity, rage, harshness and ignorance: Arjuna, these are the qualities of the demonic man.

The man with the divine nature finds deliverance and the demoniacal one is bound in darkness.”

Arjuna looked up anxiously at Krishna, who laid a hand on his head. “Don’t be afraid, Pandava, your nature is divine and so is your destiny. But let me tell you about the evil ones. They know nothing of the paths of karma or renunciation. They know nothing of purity, truth, or dharma.

They say the world is unreal, without a basis, without a Creator. These ruthless men of feeble understanding rise as the enemies of the earth to destroy her.

They are full of hypocrisy, vanity and delusion and abandon themselves to insatiable desire. They live in ceaseless lust and foolish cares, which end only when they die. Their single mission is to amass all the wealth they can, by the vilest means.

‘I am the lord, the great one,’ they think. ‘This is mine and the other shall be mine, as well. I am mighty, successful and happy. I am rich and wellborn; who is there like me? I shall sacrifice, I shall be bounteous, I shall always be joyful!’ Yes, so they think, deluded.

Bewildered by a dark jungle of thoughts, entangled helplessly, they fall into hell. Conceited, obstinate, arrogant with wealth and power, they perform hollow yagnas, with much ostentation and no regard to the inner content. Given completely to lust, anger and violence, they hate me in others and in themselves, too.

These ruthless spirits I cast again and again into dark wombs, in the great cycle of deaths and rebirths. And fallen into demon wombs, birth after birth, the malignant ones never rise to me, but devolve to the lowest, bestial state.

Three-fold is the gateway to hell, three-fold the way to the ruin of the soul: lust, greed and anger. The man who is free from these naturally does what is best for his soul and attains perfect bliss, the changeless condition.

But he who discards the scriptures and follows his baser nature’s call, he does not come to perfection or joy, or the highest peace.

Arjuna, in this world, let the scripture be your guide; it is sacred, it comes from me.”

Arjuna asked, “Those who don’t regard the scripture, but sacrifice to God in faith, what place have they? In sattva, rajas or tamas?”

Krishna said, “Each man believes according to his nature and he is what he

believes.

Sattvic men worship the Gods, rajasic men worship wealth and power and men of tamas worship the spirits of the dead. They make gods of their ancestors' ghosts.

Because vanity and lust fill them with egotism, the demonic ones mortify their bodies with violent austerities, which the scriptures do not ordain. These fools weaken their organs of sense and outrage me, who dwell in them.

The sattvic sacrifice is scriptural; it seeks no reward. The rajasic one is all for show and gain and the sacrifice of tamas distributes no food, no hymns are sung and it is faithless.

Worship of the Gods, of rishis and gurus, purity, uprightness, continence and non-violence: these are the tapasya of the body. Sweet words that offend no-one, but are truthful and kind and the charity of the Veda are the tapasya of speech. Serenity of mind, gentleness, integrity of purpose, self-control and silence are the tapasya of mind. Together, these are the three-fold tapasya of sattva.

The rajasic tapasya is done out of pride, seeking fame, for the sake of exhibition. The obstinate penance, performed for the lust of pain, or to hurt someone, is the tamasic tapasya.

The sattvic charity is dutiful, made to the deserving, at an auspicious moment and place and seeks nothing in return. The rajasic gift is always made with a selfish purpose, for some gain. And the tamasic gift is a contemptuous one, made without regard for time and place and neither for the one that receives it.

AUM TAT SAT is the three-fold symbol of Brahman. The brahmanas, the Vedas and the yagnas were ordained, of old, by this.

AUM say the bhaktas of Brahman at sacrifice, penance and charity. TAT they say at sacrifice, penance and charity. SAT means the Absolute, Arjuna, everything that is auspicious, good and true. All penance, sacrifice and charity are called SAT.

But if a man perform any of these without faith in Brahman, it is asat, unreal, of no account here or hereafter.”

NINE

THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Near the end of the dwapara yuga, between two armies, the Pandava warrior Arjuna said to his cousin, the Avatara, “Krishna, tell me about renunciation and relinquishment and the difference between the two.”

The kali yuga yawning before him, the Dark One of Dwaraka said, “Renunciation is when you abandon karma out of desire. Relinquishment is when you act, but abandon the fruit of what you do.

The karma of sacrifice, penance and charity must be performed; these are the purifiers of the wise. But they should be done with no attachment for their results.

The tamasic renunciation is through ignorance, the rajasic through fear. But if a man does his duty, forsaking its outcome to me, his relinquishment is sattvic.

The sage of relinquishment does not doubt; his nature is sattvic. He does not shrink from what is unpleasant, nor is he drawn to the pleasant. No embodied being can renounce karma entirely, but he who relinquishes the fruit of his work is enlightened.

The consequences of karma are pleasant, unpleasant and mixed, each in its season. But those who are detached reap no consequence at all, in this world or the next.

The Vedanta says there are five participants in any deed: the body, the ego, the senses, the motions of life in the body and providence the fifth. All karma, of speech, of body or mind, good or evil, is caused by these five. He who thinks that he is the one that acts, is deluded. But the man who is unattached, untainted by egotism, who acts naturally, perfectly: no karma binds him with any bond. Though he kill thousands, he is no killer.

Arjuna, there are three kinds of conscience and three kinds of happiness, too.

The sattvic conscience knows right from wrong, what is safe and what dangerous. It knows discrimination and relinquishment, what binds the spirit and what frees it. The rajasic conscience cannot distinguish wrong from right, what to do and what not to. And when a man’s conscience tells him wrong is right, that evil is goodness and distorts the world, it is tamasic.

So, too, with happiness. The man who knows the atman has the joy of pure knowledge, like poison at first and ambrosial finally: the joy of sattva, the end of sorrow. The joy of rajas is of the senses uniting with the objects of sense: sweet in the beginning, deadly at last. The warped pleasure, which deludes the soul at both beginning and end, bestial satisfaction born of stupor, sloth or cruelty, is of tamas, always fatal.

There is no being on earth, none among the Devas of heaven, who is free of the gunas of prakriti. Every man's inner nature ordains his dharma; brahmana and kshatriya, vaishya and sudra, each has his innate, natural dharma.

The brahmana's dharma is to know the atman, to be serene, restrained and pure; the kshatriya's is to be battle-skilled, fearless, generous and resolute; the vaishya's is to breed cattle, to till the earth, to trade; and to serve all men is the dharma of the sudra.

But all men are born equal and equally for perfection and each shall find it if he follows his nature's dharma.

A man worships God when he performs his prakritic dharma and so he finds perfection. It is better to perform one's own dharma, however imperfectly, than the dharma of another flawlessly. For there is no sin in following one's own true nature.

As to imperfection, all karma is clouded with imperfection, as fire is with smoke. But that is no cause to give up one's natural duty, no reason to stop worshipping God, or seeking Him.

Listen, Arjuna, to how the perfected man is one with Brahman.

His mind and heart are free of delusion, full of compassion. His senses are subdued, naturally, by a steady will, without regret. He seeks solitude, eats little, speaks less and is always absorbed in the Brahman, the truth.

Vanity has gone from him, pride, violence, lust, anger and so have all his possessions, that once possessed him. Entirely serene, he is fit to be with Brahman. And he who is with Brahman, past sorrow, beyond craving, all beings the same to him, he loves me most dearly.

To love me is to know the inmost truth that I am; knowing me is to enter my being. Everything that man does is offered to me in surrender and my grace is upon him. He finds the eternal, the place unchanging."

Krishna felt a great war won within himself: the worst over, evil overcome, retreating. Arjuna, radiant with faith, said to him, "You have removed my fear. I

feel I have already triumphed in all my battles. I know that whatever you have said to me is true; but Krishna, I want to see your divine form. Lord, if you think I deserve that revelation, show me your imperishable self.”

The armies vanished from Kurukshetra; the world vanished from Kurukshetra. Only Krishna, the Blue God, stood smiling and tremendous before Arjuna.

“You cannot see me with your human eyes, but I will give you other sight. Behold, Arjuna, my forms: a hundred, a thousand, endless. See the Adityas, the Vasus, the Rudras, the Asvins and the Maruts. See the hidden realms, the Universe and whatever you care to see. Arjuna, behold Me!”

And Krishna stood transformed before his bhakta: speaking from many mouths, seeing with numberless eyes, carrying countless weapons, wearing divine raiment and garlands, heavenly perfumes, of endless visions and marvels, irradiant, boundless. His face was turned everywhere, the nebulae were his ornaments. If a thousand suns rose together into the sky, their light might approach the splendor of that Being.

It was the vision he had shown a shadow of in the sabha of Hastinapura; now it was complete, refulgent. Arjuna saw the universe with his gifted sight, all its eternity gathered in One, in the body of the God of Gods. His hair stood on end, he folded his hands in awe and the Pandava fell on his knees. “Oh, Lord, I see the Gods and their hosts in you! I see Brahma on his lotus throne and all the rishis and heaven’s nagas. I see you with numberless arms, bellies, mouths and eyes, but I do not see your end, your middle or your beginning, O cosmic, infinite One!

I see you with your crown, mace and wheel of fire. You are the light of lights, incomparable!” cried Arjuna in ecstasy and terror verging on death. “The sun and the moon are your eyes, your face is an eternal fire whose brilliance lights the universe. The void of space between the stars is full of you. The three worlds are in awe of this Form of yours and I tremble seeing you shouldering the sky, blazing in more colors than I had dreamt could be. Oh, Vishnu, this vision makes my soul weak with fear. I see your endless mouths, dreadful with tusks, full of Time’s devouring flames and I quail. Be gracious, Lord of Gods, sanctuary of the galaxies!

I see not just my enemies and friends, but all men and women, humankind, fly like moths into your flaming jaws. Lord, I see the earth and the constellations spinning into your fanged mouths and you licking them up. Have mercy, O Godhead, I know nothing of thee!”

God said in thunder, “Time am I, waster of worlds. Fight or stay your hand, no matter: these kshatriyas will die in me. For that I am come. So, take up your weapons! Win glory by killing your enemies and enjoy a kingdom, O ambidextrous bowman. I have already slain your enemies; you are only my instrument. Kill Drona, Bheeshma, Jayadratha, Karna and the rest, whom I have damned. Fear nothing, fight and you will conquer.”

His face in the grass, his eyes shut tight, Arjuna prostrated himself at the Vision’s feet. He breathed, “O Krishna, it is well the world honors you, I understand it now. Hail, hail to you! A thousand times, hail! For whatever I said rashly to you, thinking of you as just my cousin, not knowing who you really are, calling you Krishna, Yadava, or friend, I beg your forgiveness, O Father of worlds.

Bear with me as a father with his son, as a friend with a friend, as a lover with his beloved. I cannot endure this vision of you. Be merciful; be as you were before, O million-membered One!”

God said, “My love has shown you this Form of fire, luminous, primeval, which no one has ever seen before on earth. Not by the Vedas, by sacrifice or study, not by the sternest tapasya, will anyone else in this world ever see this Viswa Rupa. But look and do not be afraid.”

Again, Krishna, his cousin and friend, stood smiling and gracious before Arjuna and gently pulled the Pandava to his feet.

Red-faced, hands still folded, Arjuna panted, “Lord! I am quiet again.”

The panic drained from his body, though he still shook where he stood. And Krishna was reminded of another purpose of the Avatara: to allay the terror of man faced with absolute Godhead.

He said, “Even the Devas, Arjuna, are always eager to see me as you just did. Only by bhakti can I be seen like that.” He embraced the trembling warrior, “He who worships me and has no enmity with any creature, he comes to me, O Kshatriya. Consecrate all that you do to me; think of me as your nearest kin. Know that I am your only refuge, be one with me in your heart.

When you are with me, I will take you over every trial and sorrow. But if you are conceited and do not listen, you will be lost. It is your vanity that says, ‘I will not fight’. You will fight, Arjuna, your own nature will compel you to. You yourself create the karma that binds you; and caught helpless in its power, you will do even what you want to avoid.

God abides in the hearts of all his creatures. He turns them round on the

wheel of his maya. Surrender to him, Arjuna. By his grace you will find supreme peace and the place beyond change.”

Krishna smiled at Arjuna, “Now you know the wisdom that is the secret of secrets. Think carefully on it and then do as you decide. These are my last words to you for now. You are the friend I chose over all others and I speak for your good.”

The Blue God was a being of pure love. He said, “Give me your heart; love me, worship me always. Bow only to me and you shall find me. This is my promise, who love you more than you can imagine.

Relinquish your karma to me, I am your sanctuary. Fear no more, because I will save you from sin and from bondage. Arjuna, you must never tell this holy truth to anyone who has no faith or restraint, or who hates his guru and mocks me. But the man who loves me and teaches my bhaktas this supreme secret of the Gita, will surely come to me.

If any man meditates upon this song of ours, I will know he has worshipped me in spirit. And the man who just listens to it, without derision, will be freed of his sins and attain the swarga of the just.”

His deep hour between the two armies over, his battle of the spirit, Sri Krishna embraced his cousin and soldier. Around them, time unfroze: horses moved, chariots and soldiers. Kurukshetra resounded again with conches, drums and tabors. Arjuna stood forth; the river of light, the Song of God, was a sea in his heart. Enfolded in his charioteer’s fathomless calm, at peace with himself, the Pandava shone with faith.

Krishna said, “Has your soul heard everything I have said, Arjuna, have I dispelled your fear?”

From his new peace, Krishna’s given peace, the archer replied, “Achyuta, your grace has made my mind firm, its doubts have gone. I will do as you say. I will fight.” And he picked up the Gandiva again.

Krishna looked at Arjuna and wondered whether, when faced with his kin, the Pandava would truly aim to kill. The Dark One’s eyes twinkled at his cousin.

Krishna took the silver horses’ reins in his left hand. With a flick of the whip, he plunged his chariot toward Bheeshma and the Kaurava army. With a ringing cry, the Avatara bore his warrior of light into the war on the crack of the ages.

TEN

THE GHASTLY WAR

The war of Kurukshetra begins fiercely, as, roaring, the two armies rush at each other. A clash of armor and weapons rends the air like spring thunder and men fall in hundreds. Death dances there, horrific and celebrant. Above every other noise ring the roars of Bheema, excited as a lion let loose from a cage! Like a hunting lion, he charges Duryodhana's army, while elephants and horses spray urine and excrete in terror.

The enemy is prepared for him. Twelve Kauravas, Duryodhana's brothers, cover him in arrows, beating him back for a time. Seeing their uncle beset, Draupadi's sons fly to his side, their bows singing. Quickly, Abhimanyu, Nakula, Sahadeva and Dhrishtadyumna are with Bheema, too, drawing blood, driving the twelve Kauravas back. Arrows flash in the sun climbing toward his zenith.

Elsewhere, Bheeshma rides at the Pandava army and Arjuna bars his way. They match each other shaft for shaft. Satyaki faces Kritavarman; the two Yadavas fight, one for darkness, the other for light. Abhimanyu finds himself facing Brihadbala, lord of Kosala, the kingdom perfect Rama once ruled. An inspired Brihadbala cuts down Abhimanyu's banner.

Breaking through the enemy flank, Bheema sees Duryodhana before him. The Kaurava roars, "So, at last we fight like men, cousin! Are you ready to die?"

Bheema replies with a rash of arrows. Dusasana faces Nakula and Durmukha, Sahadeva. Yudhish-tira sees his uncle Shalya before him. The Pandava bows to his elder and raises his bow to fight. Quick as thinking Shalya breaks his nephew's weapon in his hand with a sizzle of arrows. Roaring, Yudhish-tira seizes up another bow and covers Shalya's chariot in a cloud of fire, forcing him back.

While the great kshatriyas fight exhilarantly from their wheeling chariots, all around them millions of common footsoldiers battle and a hundred die every moment. The very first hours of the war are horrible. It is a macabre dance performed to the roars of fighting men, the screams of the dying and deafening conches and horns that echo under the bland sky: a dance inspired by a savage God, who would purify the earth in a day by washing her in blood.

No duel lasts long and antagonists change in moments. For, when a contest is too even, the charioteers veer away to seek a weaker adversary. But

Dhrishtadyumna and his master Drona fight, evenly for an hour. Morning wears into noon; though, in the violent mandala of battle, the passage of time is counted not by moments or hours, but by deaths. It is quickly obvious that, just as Duryodhana shrewdly predicted, the Kuru patriarch takes the heaviest toll. Bheeshma is like Yama on the field of fate. Not Arjuna, no-one can contain the old master. His bow is a wizard's staff and his arrows are spells of fire that flow from it like the ancient bowman's wishes. He kills thousands, even while he holds up a magnificent Arjuna.

It seems no one can stand before Bheeshma, or stem the wave of death he brings to the Pandava army. Then, a splendid young kshatriya's chariot erupts on the knot of warriors that surrounds the Pitama. From a flank, Abhimanyu scythes through the legion that rings Bheeshma and attacks Shalya, Kritavarman and Bheeshma himself. He strikes Shalya's arm deep, so he drops his bow and has to leave the field. Kritavarman stands just briefly against Abhimanyu, before he has his bow snatched from his hand by a shaft of huge velocity. Then, no warrior stands between Arjuna's son and his great-grandsire.

Abhimanyu fights like an angry Deva and, stunned by his archery, the older kshatriyas cry that the youth was a match for his father. The Kaurava army shrinks from Abhimanyu's brilliance and he cuts his Pitama's banner from his chariot. The Pandavas, who fled before Bheeshma's inexorable advance, come roaring back to fight; and the Kaurava soldiers, who had surged forward with Bheeshma, sensing swift victory, now cower from Arjuna's son.

The advancing Kaurava frontlines are breached; through the breach ride Virata and his sons, Dhr-ishtadyumna, Bheema, the wild Kekayas and Satyaki. As Duryodhana's footsoldiers flee in panic, the Pandava archers kill a thousand of them. From other parts of the field, mighty Kaurava warriors rush to stop the rout.

Drona, roaring, splits Dhrishtadyumna's bow in his hands. Aswatthama sees Shikhandi flit forward, maneuvering toward Bheeshma; and Drona's son looms before Shikhandi and covers him in a mantle of arrows, arresting his dangerous careen. Shouting in fine fury, both draw blood.

Battle is truly joined and the feral spirit of war grips the two armies. Now, as always happens, the sacred conditions of a dharma yuddha are violated everywhere. In the heat of war, its madness, few care to remember that a warrior in a chariot must not fight a footsoldier, or that the elephant-mounted must not use their beasts to trample men fighting on the ground. Why, Bheeshma kills a thousand Pandava soldiers, none of whom is remotely his equal. War has its own

dharma. It is a world unto itself, where everything is measured by the violent moment, when each man either kills or is killed. All their lives swimming before their eyes, death an immediate presence, the two immense forces fight, common soldiers and kshatriyas. Kurukshetra exists as much in Yama's realm, as it does on earth.

Renewed by rage that young Abhimanyu smashed the bow in his hand, Shalya comes roaring back into battle. In moments, he kills a hundred Pandava soldiers, until, another youthful kshatriya mounted on a grey tusker lumbers up to him. It is Virata's son Uttara Kumara who, just days ago, fled at the sight of a raiding Kaurava force. Now, Duryodhana's soldiers fly before him, because today he also fights like a young god, death riding with him.

As the sun creeps toward the western hills, Uttara Kumara and Shalya fight a radiant duel. The prince shoots his arrows in a blinding flurry and it seems that Shalya must give way before him. Shalya's horses rear at the grey elephant's advance and his sarathy cannot hold them. In a flash, prince Uttara shoots down those beasts; he draws blood on Shalya's sarathy and smashes his chariot under him with a terrific volley. Shalya finds himself stranded, his bow fallen and Uttara Kumara advancing on him.

Then, the Matsya prince gives in to a moment of youthful exhilaration. He roars that he had vanquished such an opponent and raises his own bow over his head in triumph. In a blur, Shalya seizes up a javelin from his broken chariot and casts it like a bolt of lightning. The prince's roar dies in a gurgling scream, as the lance flashes into his chest, striking his young heart in a crimson burst. Like a bird from a tree, he topples from his elephant's back.

Nearby, his older brother, Sweta, hears Uttara Kumara roar when he had Shalya at his mercy and turns his chariot just in time to see him die. Shalya still stands on the ground, unarmed beside his shattered chariot. With a howl, Sweta flies at his brother's killer. Fortunately for Shalya, seven Kauravas quickly form a ring around him. Still, Sweta fights like ten kshatriyas.

Red-eyed, Virata's son rushes at the enemy and beats back the seven warriors around Shalya. Across the field, Bheeshma sees the threat to Shalya and aims a terrible shaft at Sweta, plumed with the feathers of the kanka bird. It is an astra, the first of the war and it flares at that prince from a long way. Weaving elliptically through a hundred chariots, the missile finds Sweta. It burns his armor to ashes, then pierces his heart. Shalya heaves a sigh of relief. His tears streaming, Sweta's sarathy drives his prince's corpse away from the field.

The sun sinks behind the western hill. Conches blare from both sides and

the first day's fighting ends. The Senapatis withdraw their legions and each army collects its dead, to cremate them beside the golden river. So many have died, that they are burned in coarse heaps, with hardly any dignity. A brazen moon rises over Kurukshetra and the blood spilt on the field glimmers in its flowing light.

The first day belongs to the Kauravas. Bheeshma by himself has killed ten thousand men. Uttara Kumara and Sweta have died and their father Virata cries like a boy, all night. Across the Saraswati, a delighted Duryodhana calls for a fireside feast to celebrate; there is drinking and singing, dancing-girls entertain the Kaurava troops. Duryodhana has no doubt that victory will be his sooner than he could have hoped: in three or four days, no more.

Across Kurukshetra, Yudhishtira is plunged in despair. Late at night, after all the others are asleep, he comes alone to Krishna's tent. In a whisper, he says, "The Pitama is more terrible than we imagined. Thousands of precious lives have been cut off in a day and I am to blame.

Bheeshma is invincible, Krishna; we can never win this war against the Pitama. I have no right to ask millions to die for me, because I want a kingdom. I should return to the forest before all our men are slaughtered. Another day like this one and that is what I will have to do anyway.

Only my Bheema fights with any heart, but I know they have marked him out. How long will he escape the astras of Bheeshma and Drona? You saw how Uttara Kumara and Sweta died and Virata cries in his tent. What will it matter to him now, even if we win the war? Can victory restore his sons to him? How will I live with myself, if anything happens to Bheema?

Krishna, dread fills me. How can we reverse our fortunes tomorrow? Only you can help us against the Pitama."

Krishna says, "You take too much upon yourself, Yudhishtira; we are all with you. The men who have come to fight your cause are not children. They came knowing their lives are at risk. They know what is at stake in this war and for what they are fighting. If you do not stand against the evil ones, Yudhishtira, who will? Darkness will rule the earth.

Don't lose heart so easily, not after what you have suffered. I am here with you, Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna are here and a thousand others." Krishna lowers his voice and his eyes shine in the lamplight in that tent. "Besides, it was written long before you dreamt of this war that Shikhandi shall kill Bheeshma; what is written in the stars must come to pass. Yet, your Pitama is too great a

kshatriya to die on the first day of battle. He has killed thousands and he will kill thousands more. Then he will die and I promise you victory shall be yours. This is war, cousin and possibly the greatest war ever. There is a price to be paid for victory and you must be prepared to pay it.”

Krishna speaks so gently and gravely that Yudhishtira is somewhat pacified. The Pandava goes back to his tent, to sleep a few hours if he can, before another bloody morning. As he lies on his bed, around him he can hear an uneven sea of murmuring from his sleeping army: where nightmares of the brutal day stalk his men. Once or twice, some young soldier, whose first war this was, cries out in his sleep.

ELEVEN

THE SECOND DAY: TWO KRAUNCHAS

The second morning of the war and Yudhishtira decides to form his legions in the vyuha called the krauncha, after the crane. Drupada and his aksauhini are the vyuha's head, Kuntibhoja and the king of the Chedis are its eyes, Satyaki and his men its throat. At the krauncha's tail is Yudhishtira himself, at its wings Bheema and Dhrishtadyumna, with their legions. The other Pandavas are between these two, with the sons of Draupadi.

The sun is still low in the sky, when, from across the field, Duryodhana sees the enemy's vyuha. A frown on his face, the Kaurava comes to his Acharyas, Drona and Kripa. "My lords, Yudhishtira has brought out more men than he did yesterday."

Just then, Bheeshma joins them, after his morning ablutions and worship. Smiling to see the vyuha across Kurukshetra, the patriarch says, "Let one krauncha bird fly against another."

He begins to form his troops in the same vyuha, mirroring the Pandava phalanx. He sets Bhooris-ravas and Shalya at the left wing and Somadatta and the king of Kamboja at the right. Aswatthama, Kripa and Kritavarman he sends to the bird's tail, while Duryodhana and his brothers are between its wings and Bheeshma himself is at the krauncha's beak.

Deep conches boom, drumrolls rise and fall and rise again and the armies fly at each other. Blood leaps under the sun and flows in spate on Kurukshetra. In a brief infernal hour, the field is strewn with the corpses of countless men and their beasts. The anguished cries of the dying, especially their screams for a sip of water before life left their bodies, mingle with the roars of those who killed them. Wheeling in the sky above Kurukshetra and crowding the trees around that field like death's sentinels, are crows, kites and vultures, eager for the rich pickings. And in the undergrowth all around, not daring to steal in yet, but slaving in anticipation of a feast, other scavengers slink: hyenas, wild dogs, wolves and jackals, packs of them, astounded by this war.

Bheeshma is even more terrible this morning than on the first day and it seems the Kaurava bird will win the second day, as well. As his Pitama mows through the enemy lines, Duryodhana's laughter and his shouts of glee echo above every other sound. His chariot flitting everywhere, Bheeshma gives battle

to Bheema, Abhimanyu, Satyaki, the Kekayas, Virata and Dhrishtadyumna, all together, even as he cuts down another thousand footsoldiers, his every arrow deadly.

Some way off, Arjuna watches his grandsire in absorption, admiringly. He says to Krishna, “We must ride against Pitama, or the war will be lost today.”

Krishna whirls the chariot round to where the Kuru patriarch straddles the field. Now Arjuna is ablaze; the arrows from his Gandiva are a crystal storm. Bheeshma has to pause his slaughter to face the third Pandava. In all the Kaurava army only Bheeshma, Drona and Karna can stand against Arjuna in battle and he sweeps at Duryodhana’s legions like a forest-fire with the wind behind it. The Pandava’s archery is uncanny and his sarathy’s maneuvers in the chariot of the white horses, are unearthly.

They are an army by themselves, the Pandava warrior and his dark charioteer. The gandharva horses’ hooves hardly touch the ground and that chariot seems to divide itself in a hundred rathas and to be everywhere on Kurukshetra at once. Even Bheeshma’s valor pales when Arjuna takes the field. The Pandava’s arrows of light, every one a killer, spring like a river in his hands, like the Ganga risen in flood to make the earth pure again.

Arjuna takes Bheeshma’s breath away and the patriarch is driven back. Duryodhana cries in dismay, “Acharya! To the Pitama, fly!”

Drona flashes to Bheeshma’s side, where no other warrior can remain because of Arjuna’s arrow-storm, enveloping Kurukshetra in its own darkness, killing hundreds, while Krishna’s laughter rings above the screams of the dying. Through that tide, Drona hews a path for himself. Behind him ride Jayadratha and Duryodhana: to relieve the beleaguered Bheeshma. At first, it seems that it makes no difference to Arjuna if he fights one kshatriya or three. Vikarna plunges forward in the path Drona clears.

But not four fine archers make any impression on the Pandava. He only grows fiercer and Krishna’s chariotry more incredible than before. The Pandava’s ratha is an evanescent target the Kau-rava bowmen can hardly aim at. The white horses seem made more of the stuff of time and dreams, than flesh and blood: they are everywhere and nowhere, at once. But the tide of arrows from the Gandiva is real enough and soon Drona and Bheeshma are bleeding, while their own shafts find no mark on their brilliant adversary.

Holding the Kaurava archers at bay all around him, Arjuna kills thousands of their soldiers. Then, Satyaki flies up to Arjuna’s side and with him come

Virata, Dhrishtadyumna, Abhimanyu and the sons of Draupadi, who engage Drona so he must turn away from Arjuna. The advance of the Pandava force is more determined than ever, Duryodhana's army is beaten back; numberless soldiers die and for the first time, the Kaurava feels a stab of fear.

He flashes up to Bheeshma and cries, "Pitama! Arjuna kills a hundred men every moment. Yet, Drona and you fight him like a favored son. I wish Karna had been here! You insisted he should not fight and now you hardly raise your bow against Arjuna."

Bheeshma roars in sorrow, "Aaah! I am cursed to be born a kshatriya!"

He raises his conch and blows a desperate blast on it. He cries at his sarathy, "Ride at Arjuna, fly at my grandchild!"

Across the field, Krishna sees the Kuru Pitama hurtling toward him and, with a blast of his own on the Panchajanya, flicks his whip at his horses and dashes forward to meet Bheeshma's charge. Both chariots yoked to white steeds, it is such a sight to see them sweep at each other.

The Earth and the Devas gathered invisibly in the sky hold their breath when Bheeshma and Arjuna duel. They fight as they never have before. Their bows seem to have lives of their own and the arrows from them are the notes of an eerie song. Time stands still and so do the other kshatriyas around the peerless two.

Neither gives an inch; neither can quell the other, they are so perfectly matched. Yet, there is one difference between them: Krishna in Arjuna's chariot. All else being equal, the Dark One's time-like maneuvers drain Bheeshma, threatening to tilt the duel Arjuna's way. Suddenly Bheeshma looses a Brahmastra at Krishna, taking him squarely in the chest, so he slumps over his reins.

In a flash, Arjuna kills Bheeshma's sarathy with an arrow through his throat that affixes him to his seat. Bheeshma has to take the reins himself and they fight on. Krishna, whom no astra can harm, clenches his teeth and draws out Bheeshma's shaft, dripping blood. The deep wound heals instantly! The Dark One takes up his reins again and Bheeshma cannot drive his horses and fight Arjuna at once. He rides off the field to fetch another sarathy.

Lusty cheering breaks out among Yudhishtira's legions and, renewed in the courage that even Bheeshma can be put to flight, they swarm forward to have revenge on the Kauravas for the previous day's massacre. Duryodhana's eyes blaze, he roars; but he is helpless to check the Pandava onslaught.

Across the field, away to the left of where Bheeshma and Arjuna fought, another duel rages between two old antagonists. Drupada and Drona fight wildly. Here, too, the rest of the battle pauses around them; their soldiers stand gaping.

However, this is no exhibition, but war. Seeing his father absorbed in the nuances of archery, instead of fighting to kill his enemy, Dhrishtadyumna rides to help Drupada. Drona greets him with a lance of fire, a gash of lightning. Bheema sees Dhrishtadyumna reel under Drona's assault and flies at his Acharya from a flank, drawing his fire. Duryodhana sees Drona fighting alone against three men and cries to the king of Kalinga to help him. Kalinga arrives with his son beside him and seeing them Virata rides to Drupada's side. Drupada and Virata battle Drona, while Dhrishtadyumna, the Senapati, has already wheeled away to bolster his legions elsewhere.

Kalinga, his son Sakradeva and Ketuman attack Bheema from three sides. But Bheema roused is like a bull-elephant in season. His very roars are unnerving and he fights like a force of nature. Sakradeva makes the fatal mistake of lowering his bow for a moment. From an impossible angle and from behind his back, Bheema strikes Sakradeva through his face with an arrow, killing him at once.

Blood leaping in his eyes, Kalinga rushes at Bheema with Bhanuman at his side. Bheema casts a mace at Bhanuman with his left hand, smashing his head and he falls with a sigh, his brains spilling out. Duryodhana cries out to Satya and Satyadeva that they must protect Kalinga. Bheema, having tasted kshatriya's blood, is exuberant. His roars ring across the field and when he is not sorely pressed for a few moments, he kills a hundred common Kaurava soldiers. He is in his element! Here, at last, is the revenge for which he had waited thirteen years. Bheema is dreadful, he is inexorable; he is a hot wave of death.

The enemy can neither stand against him nor flee. Satya and Satyadeva barely begin fighting Bheema before he kills them both, almost at once; one with an arrow through his eye and the other's head he strikes off with an axe. Next moment, he finds Kalinga with a humming shaft and that king falls in his chariot, struck through his heart. Bheema's roars echo in the noonday sun and brave men's limbs turn weak.

Seeing their king die, the Kalinga army rushes at the Pandava, a thousand men. Shikhandi flies to Bheema's side with a part of Drupada's legion. Bheema slaughters a hundred soldiers in delight, but the enemy's numbers begin to tell even on him. From across the field, Dhrishtadyumna sees the son of the wind surrounded and, blowing a blast on his sankha, dashes up to help his friend.

None of the Pandavas is as dear to Dhrishtadyumna as Bheema is and none of the Yadavas as Satyaki. Some way off, Satyaki hears Dhrishtadyumna's conch and in a moment, he too is at Bheema's side. The three fight, back to back and wreak havoc on the Kalinga army. They crush the enemy as if they were, indeed, columns of ants.

Away to the left, Bheeshma hears the screams of those who faced that trio and plunges at Bheema. A pure kshatriya now, on fire, the Kuru Pitama casts a javelin charged with an astra at his grandson. For the long moment of the missile's flight, battle freezes around the Pandava. Burning with power, the lance flashes straight at Bheema's chest. Bheema is so busy butchering Kalinga's soldiers, he has not seen it. At the last shred of an instant, Dhrishtadyumna yells, "Bheema!"

Turning his head, the Pandava sees the spear flying at him and leaps right out of his chariot! The lance whistles by. In rage, Satyaki kills the new sarathy Bheeshma has brought into battle; and, once more, the patriarch has to leave the field. Seeing Bheeshma sent off, what remains of the Kalinga army turns tail. Satyaki rides up to Bheema and cries, "Vayuputra! How many kshatriyas have you killed today? Kalinga, Ketuman, Sakradeva, Bhanuman, Satya and Satyadeva too! Bheema, you by yourself are enough to finish this enemy."

Glowing, they embrace before climbing back into their chariots for more hunting. The sun has climbed past his zenith and begins his descent in the sky, when Aswatthama rides to check the bloody progress of Drupada's sons. Drona and Kripa ride with him. A pitched battle breaks out, a thing of beauty and terror.

Duryodhana's son Lakshmana challenges Abhimanyu. The war unfolds all around in shifting tides: Yama Deva's dark nritya. Duryodhana sees his son pressed hard by the wizardly Abhimanyu and goes to his rescue. Duryodhana's royal guard rides with him and Abhimanyu is surrounded by enemy chariots. He is as magnificent as his father and gives them a breathtaking fight.

Meanwhile, Bheeshma has returned to the field and, with Drona at his side, he faces Arjuna again. It is quickly plain that not his Pitama and Acharya together can contain this Pandava. Arjuna's archery is of another order, a supernatural thing. Soon, Bheeshma cries to Drona, "I can't hold him! The sun is sinking, we must withdraw."

Bheeshma blows his conch, giving the signal for the day's battle to stop. Both armies withdraw and set about the grisly task of gathering the dead and burning them beside the river.

Tonight, the mood in Yudhishtira's camp is in some contrast to the previous night's. There can be no doubt: this day belongs to the Pandavas. Bheema is the day's hero; no one else has killed as many great Kaurava warriors as he has. Satyaki and Dhristadyumna cannot praise him enough, as they sit around the blue-gold flames of a campfire. Then, Yudhishtira says, "Our fortunes turned when Arjuna beat Bheeshma back. Or, who knows if we would all be sitting here now?"

Arjuna murmurs, "My strength is my sarathy."

Krishna's eyes shine in the firelight; at least, tonight there is no talk from Yudhishtira about abandoning the war and going back to the jungle.

Across the Saraswati, the mood is one of dejection; there is no singing, no dancing or feasting. Duryodhana huddles in his tent with Karna, Dusasana and Shakuni. They hardly say a word to each other; there are no illusions about who has won the day.

TWELVE

THE THIRD DAY: THE EAGLE AND THE CRESCENT

Bheeshma is up before the sun the next morning, the third day of the war. He, too, has lain awake, thinking how best to confront the Pandava army after its triumph on the second day. Bheeshma gathers his commanders and says, “Yesterday, we made the mistake of using the same vyuha as the Pandavas. It seems Dhrishtadyumna is a master of the krauncha and they scattered us as they pleased. Today, we will use a garuda vyuha.”

So, Bheeshma himself is the eagle’s beak, Drona and Kritavarman are its eyes. Just behind them, Aswatthama and Kripa are its head, the Trigartas and Jayadratha are the bird’s neck, Duryodhana is its heart, with his brothers around him and Vinda and Anuvinda, the Avantis. The king of Kosala, Brihadbala, is the garuda’s tail.

Across the field, as first light of day spills over the armies, Arjuna and Dhrishtadyumna watch Bheeshma deploying his legions. Arjuna says, “The garuda vyuha. The krauncha was lucky for us yesterday, but the eagle hunts the little bird.”

Dhrishtadyumna thinks just a moment, before he says, “Against the garuda always use the chan-drakala!” He smiles, “At least, that is what Acharya Drona used to say.”

Bheema positions himself at the very tip of the crescent, on the right, where it is slenderest. Coming into the vyuha, Drupada and Virata with their armies are its curving length, their soldiers and chariots thickest toward the heart of the vyuha, like the moon at the end of its first quarter. At the crux of the crescent is Yudhishtira, with his army of elephants. Again, to the thinning left, are Satyaki and Draupadi’s five sons, then Abhimanyu and his stepbrother Iravan, the naga princess Ulupi’s son.

Another warrior has arrived in Kurukshetra in the night, summoned by his father with just a thought. He is a magical being, a rakshasa: beyond Iravan, is Ghatotkacha, a legion by himself. Past Ghatotkacha are the Kekayas; and, finally, at the left tip of the crescent is Arjuna, blue Krishna his sarathy.

Soon, the Senapatis face each across the field and sea-conches echo around

them. Bheeshma and Dhrishtadyumna raise their arms high and bring them down dramatically for the fighting to begin. The two forces plunge at each other, raising clouds of dust. Today Jayadratha, Drona, Purumitra, Vikarna and Shakuni encircle Bheeshma in protection. On the other side, facing them, is Bheema, with Satyaki, Ghatotkacha and Draupadi's five sons around him.

Bheema's son by Hidimbi looms ominously on Kurukshetra. The Kaurava army shrinks from Ghatotkacha. The first hour of battle belongs to the young rakshasa. He is a fell wind that blows everywhere and there is no escaping him. He kills a thousand Kaurava soldiers, with weapons, with his bare hands. Then, from a flank, Duryodhana himself marshals a hundred chariots and rides at Ghatotkacha, at least to contain him. To kill him will be hard, since arrows do not pierce his skin and great strokes of sword and axe glance off him.

Meanwhile, Bheeshma fights to have revenge for the rout of the previous day. He reaps the Pandava soldiers as if they are a field of ripe corn before him. Krishna takes his chariot to face Bheeshma and another intense duel begins between Arjuna and the patriarch. Today Arjuna finds it hard to match his grandsire and he cannot stop Bheeshma from killing hundreds of men around him even as they fight.

Elsewhere, Abhimanyu and Satyaki encounter Shakuni and his legion. Here, too, Shakuni fights more with deceit than courage. Yet, he is also a formidable archer, who can always make an enemy think he is less of a bowman than he truly is. Shakuni smashes Satyaki's chariot and kills his horses when the Yadava's back is turned. It is not the noble way, but definitely Shakuni's; and this is war. Cursing, Satyaki leaps into Abhimanyu's chariot and fights on.

At his age, Bheeshma finds Arjuna's archery more than he can bear for long. He soon finds the Pandava absorbs him so he cannot raze the enemy army around him. Bheeshma swerves his chariot from the duel and rides away to challenge the advance of Yudhishtira's elephant legion, which crushes a hundred Kaurava soldiers every moment. Nakula and Sahadeva fight at Yudhishtira's side and Bheeshma does not find this contention much easier than the one against Arjuna.

Away to the left, Ghatotkacha has all but destroyed Duryodhana's force of a hundred chariots. They lie broken everywhere, horses in pools of blood, warriors and charioteers with their heads struck off, or arrows stuck deep in their chests, dead and dying, as if they had the mischance to cross the path of an armed typhoon. Ghatotkacha, his roars chilling, still pulls Duryodhana's soldiers from their chariots and wrenches their heads from their necks with his hands. When he

chooses, he towers over the rest of the field like a small hill, or flies through the air, wingless, to fall on another hapless foe.

When Duryodhana confronts a tiring Ghatotkacha and overwhelms him with a rage of astras, Bheema storms up to take his cousin unawares. The mace he hurls strikes Duryodhana on the side of his head, felling him in his chariot. At once, the Kaurava's sarathy rides out of battle, while Bheema's triumphant roars rock Kurukshetra.

Drona and Bheeshma have to ride, themselves, to quell Bheema and his rakshasa son. Satyaki flashes to Bheema's side and the battle turns the Pandava's way again. Bheema kills hundreds, roaring so dreadfully that his enemies stand petrified before him. Duryodhana recovers from his swoon, flies back into battle, to find Bheema desiccating his army.

Duryodhana rides to his grandsire and cries, "Pitama! Our army shrinks every moment, when Bheeshma commands it, when Drona and Aswatthama fight for me. It is your love for the sons of Pandu; none of you fights as you would if the enemy were someone else. Pitama, if you won't fight as you can, let Karna take your place as my Senapati."

Duryodhana is panting; his eyes are full of anger. Bheeshma laughs in his face. "My poor child, your envy blinds you to the truth. For so many years, we have told you that Pandu's sons are invincible. They are Devaputras; they fight with the strength of their fathers. How can mere mortals stand against them? But this was the only way you would be convinced. As for loving you, aren't we fighting on your side, Drona, Aswatthama and I, that you say we don't love you? I am an old man, but watch me take fire to the enemy!"

The ancient warrior charges the Pandava army. He is like an elephant prodded by his mahout and this is just what Duryodhana intends. Pandava soldiers flee, screaming that Yama Deva, the God Death, had come to hunt on Kurukshetra. Not Bheema or Arjuna is half as fearsome as Bheeshma is now. Arrows flare from his bow, endlessly and they see him in the north and the east, the west and the south, as he lets a froth of blood.

Krishna says grimly to Arjuna, "You swore you would kill Bheeshma, Drona and the rest. The time has come to keep your word. Whenever you face Bheeshma, you seem to remember only that he is your grandfather. Look how he tears through our lines, don't the screams of our men move you? Haven't they come to fight for your honor, that you let Bheeshma slaughter them? Our army melts before him like snow at the sun's touch."

His face taut, Arjuna says, "Take me to him, Krishna."

Krishna points his horses at Bheeshma's chariot. As they flash forward, Arjuna cuts the patriarch's banner from over his head. Bheeshma roars in delight, "Arjuna, there is no archer like you on earth! Come, let us fight."

Hearing his Pitama's voice, Arjuna grows soft at once. While Bheeshma's arrows are flames, the Pandava seems content just to defend himself, cutting down his grandsire's searing volleys, but hardly attacking the old lion himself. Bheeshma kills a hundred footsoldiers around them, while Arjuna does little to stop him. Again, Krishna is wounded and Arjuna himself. Bhoorisravas, Drona, Vikarna and Jayadratha rush to Bheeshma's side and push Arjuna back so ferociously it seems they will have his life. Satyaki flies to Arjuna's side and so does Yudhishtira's legion. They are certain Bheeshma will kill Arjuna, who still hardly resists his Pitama.

Suddenly, Krishna throws back his head and gives a roar that shakes the earth, the roar of an angry God! Every soldier pauses at that sound. Krishna cries, "Satyaki, watch me kill Bheeshma! It seems the sarathy must take a hand in the fighting, for his kshatriya has no stomach for battle. I swore that Yudhishtira will be crowned lord of the earth. I swore that Draupadi will have revenge. But how will they, if Arjuna fights like this? Satyaki, watch me burn the sinners!"

In a moment, Krishna is Narayana the Destroyer on the field of death. Darkness falls on Kurukshetra and the only light upon it is the light from the Blue God's body. He is so bright and awesome, that all the fighting freezes in a wink; the men stand rooted in terror of him. The Sudarshana Chakra a wheel of flames in his hand, raised above his head, Krishna leaps down from his chariot and strides toward Bheeshma's chariot. It seems his body is made of blue fire, so blinding they cannot look at him; and his eyes are cold and wild as stars. The Chakra shines like the primordial lotus that sprouted from Vishnu's navel.

Seeing Krishna like that the wise men on Kurukshetra think the end of the world has arrived. They stand praying. But Bheeshma is not perturbed; he bows his head to the God coming to kill him. A smile on his lips, he says calmly, "Devadeva, I beg you, kill me with your own hands. For what greater glory can I hope? Knower of hearts, you know how I loathe my life and long for death. I beseech you, kill me, give me my freedom!"

Solemnly, Bheeshma raises his bow to fight. Arjuna leaps down from his chariot and is at Krishna's side in a flash. The Pandava clutches the Avatara's hand with the Chakra blazing over it. Krishna hardly sees his warrior; he is blind

with rage. Wailing, Arjuna falls at the Dark One's feet and clasps them.

"No!" cries the Pandava. "You mustn't be so angry. You must not do this thing. Krishna, I will fight, I swear I will fight as you want me to. On the head of my Abhimanyu, I swear I will fight as I have never fought before. Let it be my Pitama or my Guru: I will fight to kill them! My Lord, you must keep your oath. What will the world come to if you break your sacred word?"

Krishna still stands with the Chakra at his finger. Arjuna cries again, "I swear I will fight, Krishna!"

For a long moment, the Blue God stares at Arjuna. Then, he lowers his arm and the Sudarshana vanishes. His body does not burn, any more and the night of dread over Kurukshetra lifts away. Light breaks on the hushed armies. Krishna lays his hands on Arjuna's shoulders and raises him up. He says, "I believe you, Arjuna. Come, let us ride."

Hand in hand, they run back to the waiting chariot. Krishna lifts the Panchajanya and blows a mighty note on it. Arjuna follows with an echoing peal on the Devadatta and the quarters shake with that twin sound. Frustrated, that death at the hands of the Avatara has eluded him, Bheeshma flies at them like a comet spewing flames.

Now, Arjuna stands forth in his chariot like the kshatriya he truly is; and not a shaft can the Kuru patriarch spare for any soldier but him. Arjuna's archery presses Bheeshma back; a hundred Kaurava soldiers fall, each moment and the Pandava legions surge forward yelling Arjuna's name.

A delighted Krishna drives his horses forward, as if he means to finish the war in an evening. Spurred by his sarathy, Arjuna invokes an astra called the aindra, his father's missile and shoots it at the Kaurava host. A flash like a star exploding flares through Duryodhana's army and five thousand men fall. With a cry, Bheeshma turns to Drona and Baahlika.

"Sound the retreat!" cries the Kuru Senapati, as the sun sinks in the west, the hue of blood.

Conches announce an end to the day's fighting. The Panchajanya rings above all the others, as a radiant Krishna turns his white horses back to the Pandava camp, with a tired but triumphant Arjuna, who seems to have finally mastered his worst enemy: himself.

Across the Saraswati, Duryodhana sits in his tent, in a black silence. Fear seizes him and no amount of wine can stop the shaking that breaks out over his body. This is the second day the army of Hastinapura has been routed. For the

first time, the unthinkable thought enters Duryodhana's heart: had his elders perhaps been right? Would he lose the war? Were the Pandavas invincible? For the first time, he had seen Arjuna fight as he had today. Can anyone kill Indra's son?

Duryodhana is terrified lest the answer is no.

THIRTEEN

THE FOURTH DAY: BHEEMA AND HIS SON

Dawn of the fourth day of the war of Kurukshetra. Conches sound to begin the fighting and the two hosts rush at each other, roaring like two jungles full of wild beasts. Death's release snatched from him yesterday, when Arjuna stopped Krishna from killing him, Bheeshma is grimmer than ever. With Drona beside him, he rides at the van of the army of Hastinapura. Krishna steers his chariot to face the patriarch: only Arjuna can contain his Pitama today.

True to his word, Arjuna fights as a man transformed. The last reserve within him gone, he fights as if he no longer knew whom he fought, or no longer cared. He brings Bheeshma up with such a salvo that it would have cut the old man in half had Drona not intervened with a shield of arrows. Seeing Arjuna godlike, Kripa, Shalya, Vivimsati, Somadatta and Duryodhana fly to Bheeshma's side. The Panadava holds them all up. Then, it seems a second Arjuna appears on Kurukshetra; arrow for arrow the newcomer matches Arjuna, forcing the enemy back: it is Abhimanyu, as resistless as his father.

The battle grows with each moment of the day. It shifts, inscrutable and fabulous, like some fleeting tapestry of violence; the roars and screams of vanquisher and vanquished are a dire symphony.

Abbreviated in an hour on Kurukshetra, ten thousand lifetimes find brutal conclusions. A gory work of art, the war rages.

Aswatthama, Bhoorisravas, Shalya, Chitrasena and Sala's son ride at Abhimanyu. The young hero holds them all off, easily, until Kripa and the Trigartas attack him, too. From across the field Arjuna shouts proud encouragement to his son. But Kritavarman and Shalya ride at Abhimanyu from two flanks and the boy is pushed back and wounded. Dhrishtadyumna, who ranges the field, sees the unequal fight and flits to Abhimanyu's side. Krishna, also, swerves his chariot nearer the scintillating youth.

Dhrishtadyumna casts a mace at Sala's son and smashes the young kshatriya's head. Screaming, Sala rushes at Dhrishtadyumna, who coolly fells that king; Sala is borne off the field in a swoon. A scathing duel breaks out between Dhrishtadyumna and Shalya. Seeing Sala's son killed, the other Kauravas who fought Abhimanyu turn on Dhrishtadyumna in wrath, which is

what the Pandava Senapati intends. Quickly, Abhimanyu and Arjuna draw some of the Kaurava fire and the three of them hold up twenty kshatriyas.

Duryodhana shouts to his brothers and, from different parts of the field, ten sons of Dhritarashtra ride to their king's side, arrows streaming to cover the chariots of Arjuna, Abhimanyu and Dhrish-tadyumna. Away to the left of the Pandava army, another warrior raises his head from butchering the Kaurava legions. He sees his brother, his brother-in-law and his nephew beset by a swarm of enemies. Bheema gives a roar that drowns every other sound on Kurukshetra and flies to the rescue! He kills a hundred men on his way, his mace smashing heads like fruit. Drenched in blood, he flashes at Dhritarashtra's sons. He has sworn to kill them all and in a moment, the Kauravas' assault turns weak.

Duryodhana sees Bheema coming, bloody-eyed, like death's specter and roars to the king of the Magadhas, who fights from elephant-back, "Stop him!"

The Magadhan, the other Sahadeva, orders his elephants to charge Bheema. He himself leads the charge and they thunder down on the Pandava. From the corner of his eye, Abhimanyu sees the danger to his uncle. Quick as thought, he shoots an arrow straight into the heart of the first elephant, the king's and the leviathan collapses with a scream, just a few paces behind a surprised Bheema. Jarasandha's son is on his feet in a wink and takes to his heels. Then Bheema is a lion loose among the elephants of the Magadhan army. He hews at them with his mace and the lumbering creatures fall, with grey brow and temple split open, their gore splashing everywhere, their trumpeting filling the air. The Pandava massacres the kshatriyas that rode on the beasts' necks, those not crushed under their falling mastodons.

Soon, Bheema dances, roaring, among the hilly corpses of the elephant legion and blood flows in streams around his ankles. His face is crimson and he drips blood as if he had bathed in it in a savage ablution. The son of the wind is like Siva, dancing his tandava on Kurukshetra. Dhritarashtra's sons tremble to watch him.

Duryodhana sends more soldiers, a thousand of them, to stop his cousin. Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi and now, Draupadi's sons rush to Bheema's side. Bheema stands like the peak of Mount Meru ringed by clouds: the corpses of the warriors and elephants he has killed. With every moment that passes, he fells more beasts and men. Mayaa's mace in his hand, the strength in his sinews, the swiftness in them, of his father, the airy Deva, he is a storm that blows on Kurukshetra: his roars are thunder, his mace is lightning and blood is his rain.

Bheeshma comes to stop Bheema's carnage. He shoots a hundred arrows at

his grandson. Bheema's arms are a blur, as he knocks the whistling shafts aside with his mace, disdainfully as he might a barrage of twigs. Seeing him struck by some barbs, Satyaki rides to Bheema's side, covering Bheeshma with fire.

Now the Kaurava lines part and a weird and wild being comes to battle, mounted in a black chariot. He is twice as tall as any other warrior, has claws for hands and fangs for teeth; his lean, naked body is covered in coarse fur. He is a spy and friend of Duryodhana's: the rakshasa Alambusa. He is so hideous, his eyes green and his breath awful, that even the Kaurava footsoldiers shrink from him. As he comes, he kills a hundred men with a curved sword, from which he licks the blood from time to time. He is a devil with power; arrows fall tamely off his hide.

Alambusa springs into Satyaki's chariot and they fight hand to hand. Strong as the rakshasa is, he is no match for the Yadava, who is perhaps the finest swordsman on earth. Their duel lasts just moments, before Satyaki buries his blade to its hilt in Alambusa's chest, drawing a geyser of black blood. The jungle demon flees, screaming; he will heal his wound with herbs and sorcery. Satyaki steadies his chariot, wipes his sword and picks up his bow.

Suddenly, Bheema sees an opening in the Kaurava ranks to the left of Bheeshma's chariot. He darts through it and, running headlong, he is among Dhritarashtra's sons like a wolf at a herd of calves. Before the first of Duryodhana's brothers can flee, the son of the wind has felled him with a blow of his mace, which strikes that prince's head off his neck, so it lands ten feet away.

With a laugh that transfixes the other Kauravas, Bheema yells, "Ninety-nine to go!"

As they stand stupefied by him, he kills another eight, while they hardly raise their weapons to defend themselves. Bheeshma calls desperately to Bhagadatta, the lord of Pragjyotishapura, who fights from a wonderful Airavata-sired elephant's back. "Bhagadatta, Ride between Bheema and the princes!"

That warrior thunders up on his beast. His elephant is one of a kind, as big as two common elephants and the earth shudders at its tread. The kshatriya who sits on its neck is the son of the Asura Naraka, who was a son of Bhumi Devi and Vishnu's Varahavatara. Krishna once flew to the secret Himalayan city, Pragjyotishapura, on Garuda and killed Bhagadatta's father. Bhagadatta is immense and as fierce and strong is his elephant Supritika. With ichor, the juice of rut, flowing down its temples, the beast fights like a vyuha by itself, goring and trampling Pandava footsoldiers.

Bhagadatta casts a sorcerer's lance at Bheema. It strikes the Pandava senseless. Supritika rushes forward to crush Bheema underfoot, but suddenly another elephant looms in his path, with a black and implacable warrior on its neck, whose smooth head shines in the sun: Ghatotkacha come to save his father! Hidimbi's son fights with maya. At times, Bhagadatta sees him and at others, he is an eerie mist. He fights from elephant-back and from the ground; and then, again, he flies through the air, so it seems he is in many places at once. Wherever he is, invisible or plain to the eye, he fights splendidly. Ghatotkacha's smaller elephant locks tusks with Bhagadatta's monumental animal and, mastering him with sheer courage, pushes him back. Trumpeting shrilly, Bhagadatta's elephant turns tail.

Meanwhile, Bheema is on his feet again; shaking the stupor from his head, he fights more wildly than before. Bheeshma cries to Drona and Duryodhana, "Fly to Bhagadatta! Before he is killed."

They surge forward in their chariots and a hundred men with them. They cannot stand against Bheema and his rakshasa son. Ghatotkacha's maya bewilders the Kaurava legions; the very sight of him, black, sleek and ferile, strikes terror into them. The soldiers panic and the rakshasa lets another sluice of blood on Kurukshetra, with Bheema roaring encouragement. Until, Bheeshma roars above the hellish bedlam of war, "Sound the conches! We will fight again tomorrow."

He turns his chariot and leaves the field. The conches blare and, at once, the fighting stops, two hours before sunset today. Bheema and Ghatotkacha cease their festival of slaughter and stand glowing and bloody with their arms around each other. A cheer goes up from the Pandava ranks and they carry Ghatotkacha back to the camp in triumph, where Yudhishtira embraces his favorite nephew. There is no doubt the day belongs to the quiet rakshasa who, now that the fighting is over, is shy of the praise showered on him.

There is celebration in the Pandava camp and even the cautious Yudhishtira allows himself the thought that victory might well be theirs and soon, if the war continues like this.

Darkness has fallen over the Kaurava legions. Dejected soldiers seek their beds early that evening. Duryodhana cannot sleep. He sits alone in his tent, spurning even the company of Karna and Shakuni. He sits with his head buried in his hands and hot tears flow down his face. The night amplifies his fears that he will lose this war.

He has lost eight brothers today. Duryodhana feels as if eight organs of his

body have been cut from him. Terror grips him that, before this war is over, Bheema will keep his oath: he will kill Dhritarashtra's hundred sons. Duryodhana remembers what the Pandava had sworn he would do to Dushasana and he shudders.

After a time, Duryodhana crosses to his bed and lies down. Still, he cannot sleep. The night wears on with visions of doom and near midnight he gets up and walks out from his tent. Wrapped in a shawl, under a glaring moon like an angry eye above, he walks to Bheeshma's tent. He enters and sits in a chair beside his Pitama's bed. He feels a little comforted in his grandfather's presence, just as he used to when he was a boy and would grow unaccountably afraid at nights.

For a while Duryodhana sits there, thinking Bheeshma is asleep; until the old man speaks softly from his bed, "Couldn't you sleep as well, my child?"

Duryodhana grasps Bheeshma's hand. Fervently he says, "Pitama, I am afraid! Bheema killed eight of my brothers today, even when our greatest warriors protected them. Every day, we go out to fight and they rout us. Already, I fear their numbers are greater than ours though we began with four akshauhini more. I cannot understand it, Pitama, this is not natural."

He clutches the old man's hand and sobs. Bheeshma holds Duryodhana to him, as he had when the prince was a boy. He strokes his head and says gently, "My child, my poor child, this is what we tried to warn you of, all these days. It is not too late, Duryodhana. Go to Yudhishtira, make peace with him. It will hurt you, surely; but it will be far cheaper than losing all your brothers and friends, your elders and masters and then your own life. At least now, you must realize that no force on earth can stand before the Pandavas. Do you know why? Why not Drona or I can contain them? It is because they have Krishna with them. No host of heaven or earth can resist the Dark One. He is God come down as a man to purify the earth. I have lived many years in this deep world; I know it well and all that is in it. I know the Avatara when I see him. Duryodhana, you must relent.

In just four days, they have killed a third of our men. If you still cannot see how this war is going to end, you are blind. We shall all be killed; those like me, who are more than ready for death and others who are young and far from prepared. All our fates are in your hands. Come with me, let us go to Yudhishtira and offer him an honorable peace. You will be remembered as the king who saved the world, as Duryodhana who conquered himself. Come, this is the time to be a kshatriya!"

Duryodhana has grown stiff as a corpse. For a while he sits gazing numbly at his grandfather's face. Then he lets go the patriarch's hand, rises and, without

a word, walks out of his tent. Bheeshma sits staring out of the open tent-flap at the mooned night outside. Duryodhana would never relent; his pride would not allow him. His mind wanders back to the day's battle. He sees Arjuna on the field again. He sees Abhimanyu, as great an archer as his father, his face a boy's. Bheeshma smiles in the dark. The House of Kuru was still the noblest house on earth. A pang of grief convulses him again, for this house divided against itself in war; and to think what its glory would have been, if all its sons had stood together. Tears fill the old man's eyes.

Bheeshma lies on his bed. He remembers another moment from the day, when he thought his Salvation had come to him: when Krishna leapt down from his chariot and strode at him in wrath, the Chakra livid over his hand. How ecstatic that death would have been! But it was not to be. The aged warrior sighs.

As he lies there, he drifts back to his childhood, to the tangled banks of a holy river. He sees his mother's face, Ganga's face. She seems so real he can almost reach out and stroke her cheek. He imagines he is a child, once more, lying with his head in her lap and her telling him wondrous tales of the eldest days of the earth. He hears her soft voice clearly; sleep steals over the tired old kshatriya.

FOURTEEN

THE FIFTH AND SIXTH DAYS

Dawn of the fifth day of the war and Bheeshma is up with the sun and deploys his troops in the makara vyuha. Across the chasmal field, Arjuna, Dhrishtadyumna and Yudhishtira decide that the garuda vyuha will hunt the patriarch's crocodile. They set Bheema at the beak, behind him is Satyaki, the eagle's head and behind Satyaki, Arjuna is the bird's neck. Drupada and Virata form the avian's left wing and the Kekaya brothers, the right. Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons are the eagle's back and its tail is Yudhishtira, with Nakula and Sahadeva beside him.

Again, the bass of conches, as the cinnabar sun climbs over the horizon. The armies run roaring at each other, with Bheeshma and Bheema at the head of the Kaurava and Pandava legions. Arrows hum across the field, in fatal song and stick quivering in enemies' flesh. Sword rings against sword, spear on spear. Thousands die, quick as thinking, all their intricate days on earth cut suddenly short.

Bheeshma and Bheema meet, but the Pandava has little taste for the fight with his Pitama. Bheema prefers fighting from the ground, with his mace, to the subtle skills of archery. He veers away soon enough, as Arjuna arrives to face his grandsire and earth and sky are lit up with a treat of astras. Weapons that could quell an army extinguish one another. Bheeshma and Arjuna are finely matched and they are the heart of the war. Neither gives an inch; each absorbs the other.

Today, more than ever, Duryodhana is determined that he will reverse the tide of the war in his favor. All night he has sat plotting nothing else. He rides to Drona's side before the Acharya begins to fight. "Acharya, I depend on you to turn this war around. Pitama and you could conquer the Devas if you wanted; these Pandavas are not your equals at all."

Drona replies, "They are invincible and nothing you say can change that. The Pitama and I and all of us, will do our dharma by you. But we can never win this war."

He doesn't pause to hear what Duryodhana begins to say, but flies at the enemy. Drona, Bheeshma and Shalya battle against Bheema, Satyaki, Abhimanyu and Drupada's sons. For the first time, Shikhandi dodges past the protective ring around Bheeshma and engages the Kuru patriarch in frenzy.

Seeing Bheeshma in mortal danger, Drona skims up to challenge Shikhandi, as Bheeshma slips away.

Seeing this, Arjuna confronts his grandsire. The other Pandavas are not far behind him. They, too, now use the Kaurava tactic of singling out the most threatening kshatriya and trying to overwhelm him all together. Bheeshma is pleased that Bheema is among those he faces: at least, he can keep the Vayuputra away from Dhritarashtra's sons.

The sun climbs to his zenith and blazes down on the war, searing the dead and the living. Once more, the field is slippery with blood, awkward with the corpses of men, horses, elephants and broken chariots. Maneuvering through these, Krishna flies at Bheeshma. The Kaurava footsoldiers flee from that chariot. They would be anywhere but in Arjuna's path. At once, the other Kaurava warriors rally to Bheeshma's side.

And now, another king flashes at the Kuru Pitama from a flank; Virata strikes Bheeshma with a shimmer of arrows with golden wings. Eyes crimson, Bheeshma turns on that kshatriya and covers him in a sheet-rain of silver shafts. Aswatthama fights Arjuna, with Drona watching in some pride: his son and the disciple dear to him as a son. The encounter is even, but Arjuna is too fond of Aswat-thama to enjoy the duel. As soon as he can, he cries to Krishna to turn away.

They see Bheema and Duryodhana fighting and pass on. Now Bheema fights from a chariot, with a bow and arrows. Bheema strikes his cousin deep in his side. Duryodhana battles on as if he did not notice the wound. Arjuna seeks Bheeshma out once more. As he goes, he sees a kshatriya who has killed more Kaurava soldiers than any other Pandava warrior today: brilliant Abhimanyu in his chariot, blowing through the enemy.

Duryodhana's son, Lakshmana, dashes forward to check Abhimanyu. Briefly, he holds up Arjuna's son. Not for long and Abhimanyu strikes Lakshmana with a long silver arrow and he staggers in his chariot. Acharya Kripa snatches the Kaurava prince into his own ratha and rushes him out of battle, before Abhimanyu can kill him.

On this fifth day, Satyaki fights like Arjuna himself. It is easy to see the Yadava is the Pandava's sishya; he has the same smoothness to his archery, the same effortless artistry. An old enemy rides up to confront him: Bhoorisravas, who has come late to the battle today. He is fresh, while Satyaki has already been on the field for some hours and slowly, but surely, he dominates the Yadava. Bheema sees Bhoorisravas pierce his shoulder with an arrow like light and

Satyaki cry out and stumble in his chariot. Bheema flashes up, beating Bhoorisravas back with a fury of arrows. He pulls Satyaki into his own chariot and rides off with him.

Meanwhile, from Krishna's chariot, Arjuna kills another thousand men, until Bheeshma storms up again to stop him. For an hour, the two duel and by now the sun is low in the west. Bheeshma looks around him and sees the common soldiers and even the kshatriyas of both armies haggard. He raises his hand for the conches to sound. Gathering their dead to burn, the armies withdraw gratefully for the night. The day's honors have been shared more equally. Between them, Arjuna, Abhimanyu and Satyaki have made sure that more Kaurava soldiers have died than Pandava; but Drona, Kripa, Bheeshma and Aswatthama have done their share of killing.

Perhaps because he is tired after five days of war, this evening Arjuna is silent and pensive. No doubt remains in his heart that he must fight and as well as he can; he still hates this war and Duryo-dhana for having caused it.

The evening meal, by firelight, is somber in both camps. The faces of those who have survived to fight on seem older not by five days, but years. Young boys have deep lines around their eyes. They have seen friends and brothers die and tasted blood by sword and arrow for the first time. Some have their hair turn grey, in these days long as lives. The war they fight is truly in death's realm as much as in life and they are so young they can hardly distinguish between the two. There is no more singing or dancing, chat or laughter left in them. Most sit silent, staring into the flames while images of the day's killing sway before their eyes.

On the sixth morning, Dhrishtadyumna and Arjuna are out on the field before Bheeshma. They form their legions in the vyuha the Kauravas had used to advantage the previous day: the makara. Bheeshma deploys his forces in the krauncha vyuha he used on the first morning of the war, the only day that belonged to him so far.

Refreshed by a night's sleep, the armies charge each other. It is as if, despite themselves, they are eager for battle, for its violent magnificence, as if nothing but war can satisfy their spirits any more. All their pasts are like dreams now, unreal; the only reality is this gruesome contention; nothing matters any more except kill or be killed.

Bheema and Drona meet head on and the Pandava slays his guru's sarathy. Drona, the master, takes the reins in his own hands and fights on. Today, it is the Pandava army on which both he and Bheeshma vent their ire. If any of the

Pandavas challenges them, they veer away from the encounter and cut short the lives of a hundred common soldiers instead.

Just as these two kill thousands of Yudhishtira's men, the Pandavas and their sons decimate the Kaurava legions.

Suddenly, Bheema feels left behind by the others. With a roar, he seizes up his mace and leaps down from his ratha. He fights again as he does best; he is at the dazed Kauravas like a freak storm of his father. He smashes down horses, men and elephants unlucky enough to come in his way. He runs blindly into the Kaurava vyuha, roaring like ten tigers. No one dares stand in his dreadful way; they fly from him in every direction. On and on he plunges, deep into the heart of the Kaurava army, where he no longer has to wait for the enemy to come to him, but is surrounded by men he can kill. His mace a blur, he is soon drenched in blood again.

Bheema rushes into the Kaurava army like a storm cloud into a clear sky. A hundred kshatriyas attack him together, those that dare. Arrows pierce his back, chest and sides. He hardly notices the pain, only plucking them out if they came in the way of his swinging his mace freely.

Meanwhile, Dhrishtadyumna, ranging the field, comes upon Bheema's chariot empty of its warrior. The Pandava's sarathy, Visoka, sits gazing anxiously toward the enemy lines.

"Where is Bheema?" cries Dhrishtadyumna, his heart in his mouth.

Visoka replies, "He leapt out of my chariot and ran toward the enemy. I saw him kill a hundred men. He did not turn back, but ran on into the Kaurava ranks. He vanished from my sight and I did not hear him roar any more. I fear for him."

Dhrishtadyumna lashes his horses at Duryodhana's legions, cleaving their ranks with death. Ahead of him, he sees there is already a path to follow: the crimson one Bheema has made with his mace, littered with dead men, their blood still leaking on to the earth. Then Dhrishtadyumna hears a commotion, screams and roars. He sees Bheema at the very heart of the Kaurava army, surrounded by the enemy, covered in blood and having the time of his life!

Bheema, on foot, faces a hundred adversaries. He fights on, roaring above the screams of men whose heads and limbs he smashes. Dhrishtadyumna rides to Bheema's side, crying out his name, arrows flaring before his golden chariot. The Kauravas that dared stand against Bheema flee at the Panchala's advent.

Duryodhana roars, "Stand and fight! Stand and fight you cowards! There

are only two of them.”

But they are like two thousand. Duryodhana roars to his brothers and they stream forward, fifty royal kshatriyas. They have decided there is little point running from Bheema, he would hunt them down wherever they ran. Rather, they would do their best to kill him: to avenge their dead brothers, or to die themselves, trying. Dhrishtadyumna cries, “Quick Bheema! Into my chariot.”

When Bheema staggers in, the Panchala’s charioteer rides away briefly, so Dhrishtadyumna can draw out some of the arrows stuck thickly as quills in his friend’s body. Bheema cries impatiently, “We’ll look at the wounds later. This is the time for war. At them, sarathy!”

Roaring like two prides of lions, they fly at the Kauravas again. They fight side by side, Bheema’s mace the thunder and lightning and Dhrishtadyumna’s arrows the killing rain. Fifty kshatriyas, all taught by Drona, face the two; and the odds are overwhelming. Suddenly, Dhrishtadyumna shoots an astra called Pramoha at Duryodhana’s brothers. It is a weapon of sleep and covers them in a mantle of slumber. The Kauravas swoon in their chariots. Bheema is about to leap down and finish Dhritarashtra’s sons, when, from across the field, another astra spumes up in a burst of silver and falls on the unconscious Kauravas, a shower of stardust. At once, they wake up and raise their weapons again.

Duryodhana rages for reinforcements and a thousand Kaurava soldiers from other parts of the field surround Bheema and Dhrishtadyumna. Yudhishtira has word that the two are fighting alone in the thick of the Kaurava army and he sends Abhimanyu at the head of a Pandava legion to them. Formed in a sleek vyuha called the soochi, the needle, Abhimanyu’s troops arrive, every man a maharathika.

Dhrishtadyumna peels away from that encounter, to face Drona who rides at him from a flank and behind. The Acharya comes quick as light, his arrows a web of magic before him. In a wink, Drona kills Dhrishtadyumna’s horses and shatters his chariot. Luckily, Abhimanyu sees the danger he is in and thrusts his horses between Drona and the Pandava Senapati. Dhrishtadyumna leaps into Abhimanyu’s chariot and fights on.

Meanwhile, Bheema’s sarathy Visoka takes courage in both hands and follows Abhimanyu into the Kaurava army. When Drona smashes Dhrishtadyumna’s chariot, Visoka is at hand. Bheema climbs back into his own chariot and, wrath undimmed, flies at Dhritarashtra’s sons again.

Abhimanyu and Vikarna fight, a hundred shafts flaring from their bows

every moment; no one can tell which the finer archer is. Seeing Bheema attack his brothers again and them shrinking from him, Duryodhana arrives to challenge his cousin. At once, his eyes shining, Bheema turns on the Kaurava, focusing his rage on his old enemy. Like two bull-elephants, they battle, but in a while Bheema begins to prevail. He beats Duryodhana back, then, strikes him down in his chariot with a clutch of fire-shafts, so his cousin faints again. With a cry, Bheema leaps down to finish it all, when Jayadratha rides up quick as a wish and spirits away the unconscious Kaurava.

A lion that has its prey saved by a jackal, Bheema charges Jayadratha. Kripa rides up and takes charge of Duryodhana, going off with him, while Jayadratha turns to face a roaring Bheema. A hundred Kaurava soldiers converge to save Jayadratha and the fighting becomes diffuse again. The sun is on the western rim of the world, once more and the day darkens quickly. Bheeshma and Dhrish-tadyumna give the signal for battle to end. Deep conches blow from behind the fighting lines and the killing stops.

Twilight falls on the field of dharma and slowly, the dead are gathered in heaps beside the blood-red Saraswati and set ablaze. Once more, the day belongs to the Pandavas: twice as many of Duryodhana's men have died as Yudhishtira's. Tonight, in the Pandava camp, Bheema and Dhrish-tadyumna are the heroes; between them, they have killed twenty thousand men, perhaps more. Tonight, there is music and celebration again among Yudhishtira's soldiers. They have cause to be jubilant: except for the very first one, all the other days of the war have belonged to them.

Later that night, a distraught Duryodhana seeks Bheeshma in his tent. For a long time, he sits staring mutely into his grandsire's eyes. Finally, he says, "Pitama, if you don't put your heart into the war, we will lose. You saw what Bheema and Dhrishtadyumna did to us today. But you will not kill the sons of Pandu, neither you, nor Acharya Drona; and I know that the two of you can finish the five of them. If you stay your hands in love, how will we ever win this war?"

Bheeshma is silent for a moment. Then, he says gravely, "I told you before the war began that I would never kill Pandu's sons. But I do kill thousands of their men every day. If their army is razed how will they stand against us by themselves? But you underestimated them and those who fight for them; especially when they fight for the truth."

Then, Bheeshma sees the cloths that bind the wounds Bheema gave Duryodhana and at once, his old eyes are moist. He rises and fetches a crystal

vial from a recess of the tent. He gives it to Duryodhana, “Drink this, my child, it will take away the pain of your wounds. Then go and sleep. You must be fresh for the battle tomorrow.”

When Duryodhana has drunk the potion, warm languor steals over him, soothes the throbbing agony in his body. Bheeshma sees Duryodhana as a child before him, once more and he tenderly embraces the prince, his old heart breaking yet again. He sends the Kaurava away and lies on his bed, numb, watching the moon climb into the sky outside. His eyes hardly notice Soma Deva’s silvery splendor.

FIFTEEN

THE SEVENTH DAY: MANY DUELS

Bheeshma deploys his troops in a circular galaxy on the seventh morning of the war, the mandala vyuha. Dhrishtadyumna and Arjuna form a vajra vyuha. Both formations maneuver quickly and are almost impregnable. The din of conches rises and the armies fly at each other.

At a spinning perimeter of the mandala vyuha, Drona faces Virata and Drupada. Aswatthama faces Shikhandi; Duryodhana comes up against Dhrishtadyumna; Nakula and Sahadeva, their uncle Shalya. Vinda and Anuvinda confront Arjuna. Bheema faces Kritavarman, Abhimanyu holds up Chitrasena, Vikarna and Dusasana at once. Ghatotkacha and Bhagadatta meet again, like two thunder-heads. The rakshasa Alambusa, whom Satyaki wounded two days ago, returns to battle, healed by his own occult powers and faces the Yadava once more. Bhoorisravas fights hand to hand with Dhrishta-ketu; Srutayas duels Yudhishtira, while, next to them, Chekitana faces Kripa.

Today seems destined more for fervid duels than general battle. Arjuna says to his dark sarathy, “The Pitama thinks his soldiers will be safe inside his mandala. Look, Krishna, the Trigartas are spoiling for a fight and they shall not live to see the sun set. Ride at them, my Lord, it is time the earth was lighter by their burden.”

Krishna sets his horses at the Trigartas, nestling in a whorl of the mandala vyuha. Arjuna pulls on the Gandiva’s string and the ground shakes. The Pandava looses an aindrastra at the enemy. The missile flares up into the sky above the Kaurava legions and hangs there, a gleaming jewel. From it, thousands of arrows fall in a bright torrent on Duryodhana’s men. As they run for their lives, Bheeshma’s careful vyuha is broken in slivers.

Susharma has to flee. Duryodhana’s roar rings across Kurukshetra. But a kshatriya in a silver chariot yoked to white steeds, his hair like mane behind him, pale as his horses, rides to challenge Arjuna. It is Bheeshma and the Pandava soldiers run every way from him. Arjuna stands his ground and meets Bheeshma’s charge with a scorching salvo.

Duryodhana yells, “Susharma, ride with me! We must watch the Pitama’s flanks.”

He thunders after his grandsire and Susharma after him. The duel between

Bheeshma and Arjuna lights up the field with coruscating astras that lock on high and then die away in cascades of sparks. Both warriors' bodies shine uncannily with the power of the weapons they invoke and one cannot look at them for long. All round Kurukshetra the fighting stops. Every soldier gazes in awe at the duel between Bheeshma and Arjuna; they have never seen anything like it before.

Both fight from a protective enclave of kshatriyas, so they cannot be surprised from a flank or from behind. Then, Drona, not content to be a spectator, attacks Virata with a roar. Today that king is prepared for the Acharya. Swifter than Drona expects, Virata breaks the brahmana's bow in his hands, cuts down his banner and kills his sarathy. Drona seizes up another bow and dispatches Virata's sarathy with a light-like shaft.

Virata's son, Sankha, rides up at once and takes his father into his ratha. The two then fight Drona together; while the Kuru Acharya drives his own chariot and holds them off with a stream of fire. Drona finds young Sankha a formidable adversary and looses an astra like a meteor at the boy. The shaft takes the prince in his chest, cuts through his armor like butter and breaks into his heart. Sankha dies without a sound, his blood splattering his father.

This is the third son he has lost to the war. With a howl, Virata leaps out of the chariot and runs away. Drona fights on, in icy calm, killing a hundred men every moment. Aswatthama and Shikhandi fight across the field: evenly matched and brilliant. Shikhandi strikes Aswatthama with three arrows, in swift succession. Crying aloud in pain, Aswatthama cuts Shikhandi's sarathy's head from his neck with a wedge-tipped arrow and kills his horses with shafts through their eyes.

Undaunted, Shikhandi leaps down and, sword in hand, rushes at Aswatthama. Aswatthama covers him in fire, but Druapada's son whirls his blade round and strikes down every shaft. He is a hawk fighting in the sky, the whirling sword his wings. Just then, Satyaki rides up. Shikhandi flings his sword at Aswatthama, a streak of light, climbs into Satyaki's chariot and flashes away.

Alambusa arrives to face Satyaki. They fight and the rakshasa uses maya, making himself invisible to confound his enemy. The Yadava pierces him with a subtle astra, which lights up the forest-devil's body so he cannot vanish anymore. Alambusa flies up into the sky and lashes the Vrishni with a storm of arrows. Satyaki shoots an aindrastra at him and it pursues the rakshasa, blasting a score of livid barbs at him every moment. Alambusa flees and Satyaki kills a hundred Kaurava soldiers to celebrate.

Duryodhana seeks out Dhrishtadyumna again. Dhrishtadyumna smashes Duryodhana's chariot-wheels, but Duryodhana leaps down to the ground and battles on. Shakuni rides up and gives his nephew his chariot; but Dhrishtadyumna is the quicker archer and soon, fearing for his life, the Kau-rava turns away. Not far from the fire-prince, Satyaki still razes Hastinapura's legions.

Kritavarman faces Bheema coming into battle. Bheema does not roar today; his silence is exceptional, quite deafening. But he fights as powerfully as ever and in moments he has slaughtered Krita-varman's horses and cut down his banner. Flying past the Yadava in his chariot, Bheema fetches him a blow with his mace and Kritavarman collapses with a scream, feeling every bone in his body is broken. Luckily, Shakuni is at hand to save him from Bheema. Now Bheema lets out a full-throated roar, his first of the day. He leaps down from his chariot and, like a hurricane, sets on the elephants of the Kaurava army.

As the sea does the Ganga, the Pandava army quells the Kaurava legions. Not that Duryodhana's warriors fight tamely. No, they are ferocious, they are inspired; but they are small match for Yudhishtira's men. Inexorably, the army of Hastinapura dwindles, as if its soldiers have just one ambition on Kurukshetra: to die and find the swarga meant for those killed in battle.

In a chariot glowing like the morning sun, Ghatotkacha accosts Bhagadatta mounted on his white elephant. The lord of Pragjyotishapura seems like Indra himself come down to Kurukshetra; and Ghatotkacha cannot match the asura today. Bhagadatta kills his horses. Ghatotkacha casts a glimmering javelin at the demon, but Bhagadatta cuts it in three pieces. Ghatotkacha wisely leaves the field; the asura spurs his pale beast forward and it tramples the Pandava soldiers, gores them dead.

Madri's brother Shalya battles Nakula and Sahadeva and the uncle is delighted by his nephews' valor. Even when they wound him sharply, he shouts encouragement to them. But Shalya does not stay his hand because he is fighting his sister's sons. He covers them with arrows like silver hail and soon kills Nakula's sarathy and horses. In a blink, Sahadeva is at his twin's side and his brother leaps nimbly into his chariot. He sees how violently Shalya shoots at Nakula; Sahadeva casts a heavy lance at his uncle and fells him. Shalya faints and is driven off the field.

High noon and Yudhishtira and Srutayus face each other on the field of the Kurus. The gentle Pandava is a cobra spitting venom! Srutayus is a gifted archer and he strikes Yudhishtira's armor off his back with a blistering volley. Yudhishtira fights on as if he has not noticed. He kills Srutayus' horses and

sarathy and the Kaurava warrior runs away without ceremony. Yudhishtira wades into the unprotected enemy, killing a hundred men.

Elsewhere Chekitana overwhelms Kripa and the Acharya is carried off the field. Three of Duryodhana's brothers attack Abhimanyu from different sides, but not together are they a match for Arjuna's son. He breaks their bows in their hands, kills their horses and charioteers and has them at his mercy. Then, he remembers his uncle Bheema's oath that he would kill all Dhritarashtra's sons. Abhimanyu stops himself.

Bheeshma storms to the Kaurava princes' rescue. Nearby, Arjuna says to Krishna, "The old lion and our young one will absorb each other for a while. Come, Krishna, let us range the field and reduce the size of my cousin's army."

A wind sowing death, that chariot blows at the Kaurava forces, while Abhimanyu holds Bheeshma up. Susharma confronts Arjuna once more, with his legion of Trigartas.

They surround the Pandava and fall on him from every side. But it seems Arjuna has a hundred hands and a hundred Gandivas in them. In moments, blood flying everywhere, half Susharma's men are dead. Stunned by the Pandava's valor, Susharma retreats and a smiling Krishna turns his chariot to seek out Bheeshma.

Shikhandi rides at Arjuna's side; in wonderful synchronicity, the other four Pandavas appear there as well and all of them attack Bheeshma. If they can kill him now, the war would be good as won. But Duryodhana, Jayadratha and a score of others force a way to where Bheeshma battles five Pandavas and Shikhandi, at once. They rain arrows on him from every side, but not one strikes him. Like some unearthly dancer, he cuts them all down.

In a moment, Kripa, Shalya, Sala and a mortal Chitrasena are at Bheeshma's side, drawing the Pandavas' fire from him. But he has scant need of them; already, he has beaten his grandsons back with some ineffable archery. Bheema, Yudhishtira and Sahadeva have their bows plucked from their hands; Nakula and Arjuna are struck down in their chariots. Yudhishtira turns to Shikhandi and cries in rare fury, "You have sworn to kill him. If you don't hurry, we will all be dead."

Shikhandi charges Bheeshma's chariot; but Duryodhana's kshatriyas have been warned about the oath of Amba. Shalya plunges between Shikhandi and Bheeshma and a duel ensues. Nearby, Bheema and Jayadratha fight. Each has killed the other's horses and smashed the other's chariot. Now they fight on foot,

maces ringing together in showers of sparks. Jayadratha is no match for the Pandava. Bheema fells him with a huge stroke and Jayadratha jumps up and runs. Chitrasena rides up to challenge Bheema, but the son of the wind greets him by flinging his mace at him like a thunderbolt. Chi-trasena falls and his sarathy rides off with his unconscious kshatriya.

Bheeshma confronts Yudhishtira, lord of the Pandava army. Intensely they fight, grandsire and grandson, like old enemies, neither giving an inch. It is hard to believe this same Yudhishtira always worshipped his Pitama; it is harder to conceive Bheeshma is his doting grandfather. Bheeshma shatters Yudhishtira's chariot; Nakula is nearby and Yudhishtira climbs into his brother's chariot. The twins and he attack Bheeshma together; but he fights not merely like a man a fourth his age: he fights like five Arjunas. As he holds off the three sons of Pandu, he strews Kurukshetra with their soldiers' corpses.

The Trigartas still surround Arjuna and shoot at him from every side. They draw him away from Bheeshma, fearing that if all the Pandavas combine for long enough against the Pitama, they may well kill him. Arjuna makes them pay dearly, he lets a swash of Trigarta blood. But he cannot stem the death Bheeshma brings to the Pandava legions. Twilight falls suddenly, as if a God above, heartsick of the carnage on Kurukshetra, sent an astra of darkness to stop it. Conches announce the end of the day's battle. Soldiers across the field put up their arms, blessing kindly fortune that they will live another night, while thousands of their comrades have perished.

Today, there is scant celebration in the Pandava camp. The individual duels have gone their way, on that seventh day; but at least ten thousand more Pandava soldiers have died than Kaurava. Bheeshma has killed most of them. Yudhishtira sits forlorn, while, in the camp across Kurukshetra, Duryodhana is excited as a boy.

He drinks wine, sitting with Karna, Shakuni and Dusasana and predicts, "The worst is over. They have done everything they could and they have found Bheeshma invincible. This lucky seventh day, the course of the war has turned. Now we shall win."

Shakuni says, "The Pitama is the key to victory. As long as we can keep him safe from Shikhandi, no Pandava, or any kshatriya on earth, can kill Bheeshma. You made no mistake, Duryodhana, when you made him our Senapati."

Karna's eyes are like embers, but he says little tonight of all that burns his heart.

Much later that night, across the field of death, when the others are asleep and the moon sinks in the west, one warrior lies awake and an uncanny transformation comes over him. Shikhandi lies in his bed, sleepless. These seven days he has stalked just Bheeshma and whenever he came near the Kuru ancient, another Kaurava had always come between them, even like fate. Shikhandi has hardly shot an arrow at the man he has sworn to kill. Tonight, like every other night, his lean body and his handsome face take on a strange aspect when he is alone.

The spirit of Amba comes over Shikhandi and he feels himself as he was a life ago, when he was she. His skin is hers. His thoughts, his senses, his very body and most of all, his obsession with Bheeshma, are all Amba's. And how she longs to kill him; but not—after two lives and a death, after all she has endured—with any hatred. Amba yearns to kill Bheeshma to set him free. She has always loved him and she knows, now, how much he suffers; and she knows that he, also, has always loved her.

Amba smiles. Her long wait is almost at an end. Perhaps tomorrow, she tells herself again, she can finally pierce his heart with an arrow.

SIXTEEN

THE EIGHTH DAY:

THE FIELD OF DEATH

Dawn of the eighth day of the war and Bheeshma forms his legions in the expansive oormi vyuha: the ocean phalanx, its waves of kshatriyas splayed a league on either side. Across the field today, Yudhish-tira tells Arjuna and Drishtadyumna that the most potent vyuha against the oormi is the sringataka, the horned phalanx. Arjuna is a master of this formation and soon both armies are ready for the day's bloodletting. Once more, conches blare, death's knell and glazed-eyed legions rush at each other.

It is another morning of duels. First, Bheeshma meets Bheema, who is in great heart and finds the young lion implacable. The Pandava covers his Pitama's chariot in a cloak of arrows, with such artistry that those who watch can scarcely believe it of him. Even Bheeshma is taken aback at his grandson's virtuosity and before he knows it Bheema kills his horses and sarathy and advances menacingly on him. Away to the left, Duryodhana sees Bheeshma in danger and flies to the rescue with a force of his brothers. Seeing the Kauravas coming, Bheema immediately loses interest in his grandsire and charges his cousins in joy. They hardly know how and eight sons of Dhritarashtra die, their heads crushed or struck off, or their hearts stopped with whistling shafts.

Duryodhana watches, helplessly and Bheema's oath echoes in his mind. He howls at Bheeshma, "The monster kills my brothers! While you watch as if they are not your grandsons. You don't love me, Bheeshma, only the sons of Pandu."

Bheeshma cries angrily, "You are cruel, Duryodhana! If I did not love you, would I be here fighting at your side? Even when I know you are wrong. If we did not love you, Drona and I could have kept away. When I told you the Pandavas are invincible, you would not listen. The price you pay is your brothers' lives. Every time Bheema sees them, he will kill them, as he would swat flies. You tried to save your brothers just now, but could you? Then why point your finger at me? I am as helpless as you are. All I can say to you is: Duryodhana prepare to die and see you die like a kshatriya. Keep your mind on the war, not on things that are beyond it."

Bheeshma turns away in disgust and rides off to vent his grief on the Pandava legions. Noon again and the Pandavas attack the Pitama, all together;

but he blazes on the earth like the sun at his vertex. Bheema wheels away in frustration to demolish the Kaurava elephants; while Nakula and Sahadeva turn on Duryodhana's cavalry, cutting down hundreds of fine horses and picking off their fallen riders when they stood defenseless on the ground. The Kaurava legions suffer, but this is as nothing compared to the massacre Bheeshma and Drona bring to the Pandava army.

On the eve of the war, an unusual young warrior presented himself before Arjuna and said, "My mother heard about the war that was to be and sent me to fight for you."

His green eyes were somehow familiar and Arjuna felt a surge of affection for the lean, handsome youth. Arjuna said, "Who is your mother, young Kshatriya?"

The young man smiled, "The naga queen Ulupi."

A longago sinuous night swam up before Arjuna's eyes and, with a cry, he clasped his son in his arms. That youth Iravan had proved himself as brave and skilled as Abhimanyu. He had been a bane of the enemy these past seven days. He brought a small legion of naga warriors with him and they fought with eerie weapons and serpentine sorceries, razing whole columns of Kaurava soldiers.

Today, Iravan watches Shakuni, who fights more with cunning than valor: always making sure he faces only inferior antagonists, whom he kills without mercy. Iravan sees Shakuni kill common Pandava soldiers by shooting them in the back and he rides to challenge the Gandhara king. Iravan's changeling nagas ride with him and they account for a good part of Shakuni's legion. Inexorably, Iravan moves nearer Shakuni, who cringes from him. He cannot escape anywhere, because the prince's snake-warriors ring him round.

Duryodhana cries to Alambusa, "Arjuna's naga brat is dangerous. Kill him!"

Alambusa flies through the air at Iravan, intent on fighting his way to Shakuni, whom he is determined to finish today. Ulupi's son doesn't see Alambusa, mantled in maya, fly at him from above. Alambusa materializes abruptly before an astonished Iravan and hacks his head off with a massive sword.

Bheeshma, Drona and Aswatthama take fire to the Pandava army, even as if they are the three points of Siva's trisula; the Pandavas themselves cannot contain them today, not when they combine. When Iravan dies, Ghatotkacha leaps into the forefront of battle. He, too, fights with maya and Duryodhana has

to contend with Bheema's terrific son. Today, Ghatotkacha attacks the Kaurava king himself and the kshatriyas that defend him.

Bheeshma cries to Drona, "Duryodhana is hurt. Fly to him!"

Drona, Jayadratha, Aswatthama and a score of Kaurava warriors peel away toward Duryodhana. Kurukshetra rings with Ghatotkacha's roars, when he sees more of the enemy coming to challenge him. Yudhishtira hears that sound and cries to Bheema, "Ghatotkacha is beset by a hundred men!"

In a moment, Bheema is beside his son. They fight, back to back. Enemy footsoldiers shut their ears and flee. Ghatotkacha and Bheema destroy Duryodhana's crack guard, which surrounds him when he goes into battle. Mortal screams and wild roars mingle, two rivers flowing into the sea of death. Red-eyed to see his guard slain, old hatred flaring high, Duryodhana rushes at Bheema with Aswatthama at his side. Laughing in their faces, Bheema pushes them back easily.

A thousand soldiers from both sides stream forward and the battle spreads out again. Bheema is full of incredible strength; he bristles with weapons. He flings a hundred maces at the enemy. He is invincible; he seems ubiquitous; and no one can stand before him. And when roaring, his mace raised high, he charges Duryodhana, the Kaurava feels the touch of death on him and bolts. Beside Bheema, Ghatotkacha is like five storms and so macabre that Kaurava soldiers run at just the sight of him. Or else, they stand rooted in terror and he murders them.

Duryodhana rides trembling to Bheeshma. He cries, "You must kill Ghatotkacha or the war is lost!"

Bheeshma says impatiently, "I cannot leave this battle. Take Bhagadatta, he turned the rakshasa back yesterday."

Bhagadatta comes on Supritika, his white elephant. Word flies to the Pandavas of the asura's arrival and quickly, Bheema, Ghatotkacha, Abhimanyu, Draupadi's sons and some others, too, stand together to meet the lord of Pragjyotishapura. Bhagadatta charges Bheema. The Pandava warriors cover the elephant with spears and arrows and the beast's head is slick with blood, red on white. Still, it comes on, making for Bheema. All around, kshatriyas in chariots and footsoldiers cower before the pale leviathan.

When Bhagadatta's elephant is almost upon Bheema, the king of the Dasarnas confronts Supritika on his own elephant. This grey animal is barely half Supritika's size. But its heart is great and brave and it charges the bigger

animal, goring its side, so it turns away from Bheema with a scream. The Dasarna king's elephant will not retreat before Supritika's trumpeting or his short rushes. He stands like a rock and Supritika backs away from him. The mammoths' trumpeting rings across the field and neither will give way.

Furious at being frustrated by a mortal, Bhagadatta looses a calific volley at the Dasarna king. Sensing peril to its master, now his elephant turns away. The Kaurava army roars from ten thousand throats and teems forward behind Supritika. But the Pandava warriors have had time to recover. Now many of them face Bhagadatta, at once and he can make no headway through their ranks. Supritika's rage at being pierced by a hundred lances and arrows shakes Kurukshetra.

Arjuna joins Bheema, Ghatotkacha and the rest. Behind Bhagadatta, Duryodhana calls up a legion of five thousand soldiers and sends them to fight near the asura on his elephant. Another massacre; Bhagadatta kills thousands from elephant-back and so, too, Bheema, Arjuna and Ghatotkacha from their chariots. Direst of all is Arjuna. He has news of the death of Iravan and his wrath is dreadful. Hissing like a serpent, he fights with tears stinging his eyes for his changeling son, who was his mother Ulupi's only child. Arjuna lets a cataract of blood, human fat its froth.

As he fights, he cries to his sarathy, "Now I see why Yudhishtira would take just five towns to prevent this war. It is more horrible than I ever imagined. My son is dead, what will I tell his mother? How many mothers have lost their boys on this hellish field! All this killing: and for what? For one man's vanity, for Duryodhana's ravening envy! How does fate allow this?" He is quiet for a while; but the tide of arrows still flames from his bow, as if someone else was the archer. Krishna drives his horses in silence, immaculately.

Arjuna cries again, "Surely, it is better to die a beggar than kill these millions for a throne. How I hate this war! More than anyone else, Shakuni is to blame for all this murdering. He first corrupted Duryodhana. If only someone had killed him before he ever came to Hastinapura.

Look how I wilt them and they crumple and lie down to sleep forever. Oh, look at the blood spurt from the mouths of their wounds. How I wish I had never been born a kshatriya!"

He is quiet again, before Krishna hears him sob, "Iravan, how glad I was to see you, my son. Now I wish I had never met your mother. I would not have to bear this grief that tears my heart more painfully than any arrow." Then he roars, "Krishna, they have killed my boy! Ride at them, I will make a sea of their

blood!”

As Krishna rides at the enemy, Arjuna’s arrows mow down the Kaurava soldiers in a russet flash flood, glimmering in the last light of day. Bheeshma sees Arjuna raging and comes to contain the Pandava. Meanwhile, the butchering continues everywhere. Hundreds die each moment and by now their screams, the shouts and the roars of those who kill them have become commonplace. They who have been at war for eight days are inured to these sounds.

Bheema still strews the field with corpses, as if killing were as natural to him as drawing breath. He is dripping gore again; for, often, he leaps down from his chariot and goes among the enemy, bludgeoning them with his mace and their blood splashes over him copiously. Then he climbs back into Visoka’s chariot and fights with bow and arrows. Ghatotkacha fights near his father and he is more terrible than Bheema. Bhagadatta is there: in the steaming, mindless, thick of battle, somehow containing Bheema’s rakshasa son. Supritika, the elephant, is disdainful of the arrows that pierce him.

Suddenly, a roar on that field eclipses every other sound. Bheema has hewn his way through the Kaurava ranks and come face to face with a knot of Duryodhana’s brothers, who huddle together in terror. There are eight of them and the sight of him exploding through the rest of the legion paralyzes them. Whimpering, they stand transfixed in their chariots and he makes short, brutal work of all eight. They die with hardly a cry; as if they are grateful he delivered them from the long fear of him that darkened their lives.

Duryodhana sees the slaughter from a way off and his howls rock Kurukshetra. He cries out like some mythic beast that had eight more of its limbs cut away by a shining hunter. Bheeshma hears that awful sound. He sees the Kaurava army shrink from the enemy, everywhere and he gives the signal for the conches to sound. Numb with the killing they have seen and done, the soldiers leave the field, their heads bent, neither victor nor vanquished speaking, their experience of these days beyond the ken of words.

The field they leave for the brief reprieve of night is a bizarre spectacle, with corpses sprouted everywhere. Now there seem to be more of the dead than the living on Kurukshetra; both armies, especially the Kaurava, have waned. On their way back to the camps, the men step wearily over headless trunks and severed heads struck off so savagely that their bodies are nowhere near. Those still alive often recognize a friend’s features on such a face. Jeweled arms lie with bracelets and rings glinting in the last rays of the sun. Arms hacked from

their shoulders and hands cut off at the wrist clawing the air, or clasping a sword, a javelin, a bow, as if for life itself, or Salvation: these lie everywhere. Among them lie the carcasses of horses and elephants, their eyes still staring, killed in a war that has little to do with their species.

Today, not all the dead are gathered for burning. There are too many corpses and the living are too exhausted. Finally, the wait of the jackals, hyenas and wolves, the kites, vultures and wild dogs is rewarded. They feast without favor for Pandava or Kaurava. Hideous pisachas drink from a river of blood, which resembles the very Vaitarani. Both armies have lost more men than on any previous day of the war, but once more, the day indubitably belongs to the Pandavas. Bheema, Ghatotkacha, Arjuna and Abhimanyu are its heroes. Duryodhana is forlorn again, his hopes of last night dashed. There is no celebration in the Pandava camp, either. Arjuna and his brothers mourn Iravan.

SEVENTEEN

DURYODHANA'S DESPAIR

On his way back to the Kaurava camp, Duryodhana sees all his dead, lying dismembered on the earth. Again and again, he sees Bheema killing his brothers. He finds Karna waiting for him in his tent and breaks down, sobbing.

Desperately he cries to his friend, "These last three days, I have seen that monster kill twenty-four of my brothers. Their screams ring in my ears and I have no peace. I see my mother crying for her sons. But Bheeshma has not killed even one Pandava and I fear he doesn't mean to. Each day, we return from the war, routed again and every night Bheeshma says the same thing to me, that my cousins are invincible. I cannot stand it any more, Karna. We must do something quickly, or we shall all be lost."

Duryodhana, of course, has no inkling of the secret Karna now carries, which has changed him so profoundly. The Kaurava believes his friend is eager to take the field against the Pandavas. He does not know these eight days have been a miraculous respite, a Godsend to Karna and a time when he has really begun to think of the Pandavas as his brothers. Duryodhana has no clue of the secret that bisects Karna's life. He, who once longed to take the field against Arjuna, hardly dares let the thought enter his mind now, but prays that Bheeshma will save him from the exigency; though, deep inside him, he knows it is inevitable.

Karna can reveal nothing of his secret to Duryodhana; least of all, when the war is being lost so swiftly. Now, he says bravely, "I can't bear to watch you cry. There is nothing I want more than to see a smile on your lips. Don't forget I am here: to fight for you, to die for you if I must. I grieve for your brothers, my prince. What can I say to soften your pain, except that their deaths were destined? All that happens in this world is by fate: life, death, everything; and there is nothing you or I can do to change what fate has written. How I wish I could comfort you, or bring your brothers back to life! Nothing saddens me as much as to see you like this."

Karna, too, has tears in his eyes.

Duryodhana says, "Drona, Bheeshma, Kripa, Shalya, none of them fight to kill the sons of Pandu. They raze the enemy army, but that is not enough. The Pandavas are that army's soul; if the soul isn't put out, they will win. It happens

every day: we come home defeated, our soldiers more terrified than ever, because they have seen their comrades die. Even our great kshatriyas are dispirited; no one believes we can win this war any more. They probably outnumber us now, though we began with four aksauhinis more than they did. How I wish you were on the field, Karna, how different things would have been. You wouldn't hesitate to kill Arjuna or the others."

Karna says somberly, "Your Pitama loves his grandsons too much. Besides, I am not sure that at his age he can kill them even if he wanted to. There is one solution. Tell Bheeshma to stay away for a day or two and I will come to fight. I will hunt just Arjuna; when I have killed him, the others' hearts will break. I will leave the field again and your Pitama can win the rest of the war. Arjuna is the key to victory. Why do you think Krishna chose to be his sarathy and not Yudhishtira's or Bheema's? If we can kill Arjuna, the rest will be easy."

Nothing in his voice or his face gives away what it costs Karna to make that offer. Duryodhana stares at him, for a moment, then he gets up. "I will go and speak to Pitama."

Bheeshma is waiting for him; he has been expecting his grandson. Usually so direct, Duryodhana is uncomfortable with having to tell his grandsire what he has come for. He folds his hands, then sits down near Bheeshma, but never looks into the patriarch's eyes. Bheeshma waits for him to speak.

"Pitama, there is no kshatriya on earth like you. When you took command of my army I was certain victory would be mine and I thought it would take no more than a day or two. But we have fought eight terrible days and my certainties were mere dreams. You haven't killed even one Pandava."

Bheeshma begins to speak, but Duryodhana holds up his hand so he may finish. "Your love for Pandu's sons is stronger than your love for me. I know you kill ten thousand soldiers every day. But that will not win the war for us, because they kill more of our men than you kill theirs. And, finally, this war will not be won or lost by the ordinary soldiers who die, but by the lords of men that do."

He lowers his voice, "Pitama, I have lost twenty-four brothers already, all killed by that beast. Weren't they your grandsons too? Were their lives cheaper than my cousins' lives, that they can die but not the Pandavas? On whose side do you fight, O Bheeshma, on theirs or mine? If you will not attack Yudhishtira and his brothers, I beg you, relinquish your command. Let Karna take the field tomorrow."

Having said what he found so hard, Duryodhana falls quiet. Bheeshma

sighs. He says in his slow, sad way, “Why are you so cruel to me every day, Duryodhana? Here I am at this bloody yagna, for your sake and the yagnapasu, the sacrificial animal, is I. And you still doubt my love for you? You wound me so casually with your accusations. Instead, why don’t you face the truth? I do my best, but I cannot kill the Pandavas. Even if my heart were set on killing them, I would not be able to. Krishna is with them; the armies of Devaloka could not harm the sons of Pandu.

Duryodhana, the root of your troubles is that you do not realize who Krishna is. You think of him as the Pandavas’ cousin, or as the prince of Dwaraka. You are engulfed in such darkness that you don’t recognize the lights of lights when he stands before you. It is God you are fighting, poor child, the master of all things, the lord of galaxies, the king of time, the creator, sustainer and destroyer of not just us, but the worlds. He showed himself to you in Hastinapura, so you might believe; and you fell down in fear when you saw him like that. Yet, later, you chose to ignore what you saw and accused him of performing a conjuring trick to deceive you. Ah, my son, you are so stubborn and so afraid, that I fear you will submit to Krishna only in death. What can Karna or I, or anyone else do for you? Duryodhana, the dying and the defeat are not on Kurukshetra, but in your own heart.”

Duryodhana sits very still. Bheeshma says, “Let me fight tomorrow and watch me burn their army. I will be a fire among the dry trees of summer and the earth shall never forget how Bheeshma fights. Now go and sleep, my child, you must be strong for battle. And let me rest as well, so I can show you in the morning how much I do love you.”

Bheeshma lies down on his bed and turns his back on Duryodhana. Mollified by his grandfather’s promise, Duryodhana leaves the tent. He doesn’t see the tears Bheeshma sheds: for him, for his slain brothers, for all the men who have lost their lives and, most of all, for Duryodhana’s immortal soul, plunged in darkness, its final ruin drawn near.

Later that night, another kshatriya, who has taken no part yet in the war of Kurukshetra, lies awake long after he has left Duryodhana’s tent. Karna lies roiled in his bed. He does not cry for himself, that he had such a cruel burden thrust upon him: the knowledge of who he was. He weeps for Duryodhana, that his cause was a lost one and only defeat and death would reward his struggle. Yet, Karna chooses to stay at his friend’s side, even at this impossible time.

Duryodhana still believes that if one man on earth hates the Pandavas as much as he himself does, it is Karna. How can Karna confess to him that, now,

his hatred has turned into a love that has wrought a miracle in his spirit? Changed the way he saw the world. How can he tell Duryodhana that now Karna loves Arjuna and his brothers more than Bheeshma does? That, as nothing else, would break his friend's heart. Karna, whose life has been a long injustice from its first moments, cannot bring himself to do the thing his body cries out to: to run away from Kurukshetra until the war is over!

No, he will stay. He will fight Arjuna and his other brothers. He knows life will not spare him that final trial, that last ordeal, before he finds death's release.

Karna does not cry for himself, as he well might. He is so used to suffering that he feels hardly any pity for himself. He cries for Duryodhana: because, like Bheeshma and Drona, he knows Duryodhana will lose this war and his life with it. Karna knows who Krishna is and that victory will come inevitably to those that fought on the Avatara's side. But who can make Duryodhana see the truth? No one on earth: not even Krishna, who had revealed the shadow of his Viswarupa to the Kaurava. Duryodhana rushes headlong toward an abyss; and Karna, whose heart has been exorcised by the truth, will not abandon him. This night, like every other night of the war, Karna lies staring into death's very face. He will not allow fear to master him.

EIGHTEEN

THE NINTH DAY:

THE TERRIBLE PATRIARCH

The sun rises over the remains of the dead on yawning Kurukshetra. Jackals and hyenas have picked the corpses clean. Bare bones shine by first light of day, like fossils on the bed of a dry lake. Duryodhana is full of hope again, this ninth morning of the war. He tells Dusasana, “Today we will see a long-cherished dream fulfilled. Today, my brother, our Pitama has sworn to fight as he has never fought in his life.”

They have just come out into the crisp morning and, shading their eyes, gaze out across the field at the Pandava legions, already deployed. Duryodhana points to Arjuna’s chariot at the heart of the enemy army. “Uttamaugas guards Arjuna’s right wheel and Yuddhamanyu the left; and, look, Arjuna himself guards Shikhandi today. They mean to make their attempt on Pitama’s life. Dusasana, you must see that Shikhandi never comes near Bheeshma. That is all you must devote yourself to today.”

Across the field, Arjuna says to Dhrishtadyumna, “Let Shikhandi take no part in the general fighting. I will watch him with my life: today, let him go after Bheeshma.”

Bheeshma forms his legions in the sarvatobhadra vyuha, which means ‘safe from every side’; and so it is, that square formation. As always, Bheeshma himself is at the head of the vyuha and Dusanahas arranged for Kripa, Kritavarman, Shakuni, Jayadratha, Kambhoja and fifty of Duryodhana’s brothers to protect the Kuru patriarch. The Trigartas form another ring around this inner one.

The Pandavas form their legions into another mandala vyuha. Yudhishtira, Bheema, Nakula, Sahadeva and Draupadi’s sons are at the very front. Just behind them are Arjuna, Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi, Ghatotkacha and Chekitana; after these, Abhimanyu, Drupada and the five Kekaya brothers.

Bheeshma gives the signal. Conches resound and the two armies surge at each other. Arrows light up the morning like rays of the rising sun. Swords gleam and clash and lances drift through the air. Screams ring out over the field, as the morning claims its first lives. Soon the killing begins in earnest.

Suddenly, the sun climbing into the sky is eclipsed by an uncanny cloud appeared from nowhere. Darkness falls on the field and, from the woods that fringe Kurukshetra, another army howls dismally: an army of jackals and wolves baying at the gloom. The underside of their wings pale, vultures wheel into the bizarre twilight. Everywhere the soldiers are terrified and stop fighting. The sinister cloud showers down a rain of fine pebbles on the legions and all around on the horizon, meteors fall on the earth like fantastic fireworks. Then, as abruptly as it appeared, the cloud vanishes. The howling beasts run back into the jungle and the sky is clear and speckless again. This is the dawning of the kali yuga.

While the others stand rooted by the weird omens, Abhimanyu recovers first and charges the enemy, loosing a cloud of his own at them, of arrows. Horses, elephants and footsoldiers fall to his firestorm and chariots explode when his incendiary shafts strike them. The omens of earth and air and then Abhimanyu's onslaught, are too much for the Kaurava soldiers. They turn and run, when the day's fighting has barely begun.

Like his grandsire Indra, Abhimanyu shines on Kurukshetra. The jewels on his arms and chest sparkle; his bow is a blur, so it seems that weapon bent in a golden circle is a halo round his beautiful head. Drona and Kripa ride at Abhimanyu together; he beats them back with a crescendo of arrows. Aswatthama and Jayadratha attack him from two flanks, but they cannot even approach him this morning. Abhimanyu rules Kurukshetra like a resplendent Yama.

Duryodhana rides to call Alambusa from a far corner of the field: perhaps the rakshasa's powers will be of some avail against Arjuna's son. Alambusa comes to the heart of the battle. He fights with maya. But it seems that Abhimanyu has occult vision so he sees the demon clearly, even when he is invisible to everyone else. The prince's aim is unerring. Swiftly, Draupadi's sons are at Abhimanyu's side and they, too, find the rakshasa with shafts of flames.

Roaring, Alambusa grows tall as a palm-tree in his chariot. He raises his pale sorcerer's hand above his head and intones an evil mantra. In black tides, his maya shakti shrouds the Pandava army in an unnatural night. Abhimanyu looses a bhaskarastra over the darkling field and light breaks across it again. His maya dispelled by the weapon of the sun, Alambusa stands revealed in his chariot. In fresh rage, Arjuna's son and his brothers attack the rakshasa, wounding him sorely. Alambusa invokes the siddhi of anima. He becomes a little homunculus, leaps out of his chariot unnoticed and flees.

Bheeshma rides to challenge his great-grandchild. But the prince who bears both Pandava and Yadava blood in his veins is more than a match for his Pitama. Then, Arjuna is at his son's side and they face the patriarch together. Duryodhana sounds an alarm and fifty of his brothers surround Bheeshma. They know that neither Arjuna nor Abhimanyu will kill them, for Bheema's oath; and they fight marvelously in that certainty.

Seeing Arjuna and Abhimanyu outnumbered, three other Pandavas arrive beside them. A general battle breaks out. Satyaki confronts Acharya Kripa, who fights like a tiger today. The fleet young Yadava is too much for the old master and, after a hot exchange, Satyaki fells Kripa in his chariot. Quick as wishing, Aswatthama is at his uncle's side, beating Satyaki back. The Vrishni recovers from the unexpected assault and breaks Aswatthama's bow in his hands. Meanwhile, Kripa's sarathy has ridden off the field to safety.

Aswatthama seizes up another bow and takes the fight back to Satyaki. He looses an astra that could shear the peak off a mountain. Struck squarely in his chest, Satyaki falls unconscious. In a moment, he jumps up again and fights in such fury now, that, fearing for his son's life, Drona rushes up to draw the Yadava's fire. Like Budha and Sukra battling, Satyaki and Drona duel. The Kuru Acharya covers Satyaki in a blaze of arrows: in fury that he attacked his precious son. Taken unawares by the master's ferocity, Satyaki is beaten back. In a flash Arjuna is at his side, matching his guru shaft for shaft, holding him off.

For a while, master and pupil fight as if they mean to settle a hatred they have nurtured for years. In the mandala of war, it seems Drona does not see Arjuna, his favorite sishya, before him, but only an enemy; and so, too, Arjuna no longer sees his guru, but a dangerous adversary. Their archery is a holy offering. Seeing his kshatriya so determined, Krishna exults.

From a way off, Duryodhana watches the duel with concern. He is anxious lest Dhrishtadyumna ride to help Arjuna. The encounter between guru and sishya is the converse of two sublime artists. They are like Gods speaking together about the mysteries of the universe; hardly anyone else on that field can decipher their communion. They exchange their very lives with winged shafts; soul brushes soul. Often, Drona laughs aloud in delight at a frenzied, delicate volley from Arjuna.

Once, the master flings up his arms, crying, "How you have grown, Arjuna! No one on earth could have taught you that."

Arjuna bows to Drona. Then the Gandiva hums again, its deep song. At times, Arjuna's archery is such a sacred thing there are tears in his master's eyes!

This shishya is a spiritual son, who is now clearly his guru's equal and, frequently, his superior. Drona cries, "Today I learn from you, Arjuna!"

Yet, these two also grieve that they must fight each other. Arjuna thanks fate that among the crimes he must commit on this field, killing his Acharya is not one. With reverence, the disciple attacks his master and with transcendent elegance.

Arjuna invokes Vayu, the Wind God and looses a vayavyastra at Drona. A towering gale sweeps across Kurukshetra and the Kaurava soldiers are blown about like straws. His chariot caught in the eye of the storm, his horses rearing, Drona summons a sailastra. Arjuna's tempest dies in a moment.

The duel between master and pupil swells into the esoteric realm of devastras. Around them, the Trigartas run in stark fear. Meanwhile, a way off, Duryodhana and a host of his kshatriyas surround Bheeshma in a tight crescent of protection. The Pitama faces the other Pandavas. Directly before him is Yudhishtira and the Kuru patriarch fights him most intensely. From a side, Bheema leaps down from his chariot, mace in hand and rushes at Bheeshma with a roar. At once, Duryodhana's elephant legion, detailed to guard Bheeshma against such an attack, comes between the son of the wind and his grandsire.

Far from being put out Bheema roars louder than ever and sets about the huge beasts. Some he strikes down, even as they charge him with lowered tusks. He fells each one with a single blow of his mace, smashing their lofty temples. Others, he attacks from side and rear. At times, he even leaps up on to their necks, then, kills the warriors perched there, knocking them off disdainfully, before he beats the animals to their knees. Some with their trunks cut off by his sword, fell screeching like mortally wounded birds. Like his brother's vayavyastra, like a fell wind of his natural father, Bheema destroys Duryodhana's elephant legion. Quickly, the level field of Kurukshetra resembles a land of hillocks with the carcasses of the Kaurava tuskers and it is beautiful!

The elephants that escape Bheema turn and crash away, trampling the soldiers of their own army. Meanwhile, even as he promised Duryodhana the previous night, Bheeshma makes his bow sing on Kurukshetra; indeed, no one has ever seen him fight as he does today. Even Drona stares. Bheeshma summons supernatural power today; he fights like the Vasu he was before this human life. He is Ganga's son again, who dammed her swirling waters with his arrows once: a life ago.

Seeing the Kuru ancient, Dhrishtadyumna calls his forces to combine against the Pitama. Shikhandi, Virata, Drupada and all the Pandavas together

cover Bheeshma with a thousand shafts. These never reach him, or his horses or sarathy, not one barb. They fall around his gleaming chariot like a rain of flowers. In grave calm, Bheeshma continues his decimation of Yudhishtira's army. Bheema and Satyaki join the battle; to no avail: each moment, a hundred more Pandava soldiers die on Kurukshetra, every one killed by an arrow from Bheeshma's bow.

Dread grips the Pandava army. The bravest men run from the Kuru patriarch's cool wrath. It seems that all the other kshatriyas on the field are numb spectators to the old warrior's blood-ritual. He is so calm and he is elemental. He has no need of his legions' insignificant prowess. It seems that, by himself, Bheeshma will wipe the Pandava army from the face of the earth.

Arjuna begins to draw his grandfather's fire. The Trigartas have returned to the field after they fled from the vayavyastra. They come frothing to challenge Arjuna and save some face. At first, he ignores them: he is so absorbed in his duel with Drona. Then, Bheeshma cuts loose and Arjuna sees from some way off that there is no containing him. The Pandava decides, at least, to divert the patriarch.

Drona has stopped his duel with his pupil; the Acharya has become rapt watching Bheeshma. Arjuna, too, has watched his Pitama in awe. Krishna cries to him, "We must turn Bheeshma's head to us!"

Waking from his absorption, Arjuna raises the Gandiva again, as Krishna already lashes his horses toward Susharma and his legion. At the first screams of the dying Trigartas, Bheeshma turns his chariot and rushes at Arjuna. Quick as light, Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva flit between Bheeshma and their brother. The three combine to hold up their Pitama.

Duryodhana sees his grandsire's fury stemmed. More, he sees Yudhishtira and the twins kill five hundred chariot-mounted kshatriyas of his guard. The Kaurava turns to Shalya in despair. "These three will kill all our best men. You aren't shy to fight your sister's sons, are you, O Shalya?"

Shalya has no choice but to ride at Yudhishtira and the sons of Madri. Seeing that king plunge at his brothers, Bheema dashes to their side. The four Pandavas defy Shalya and his legion. Away to their right, Bheeshma has broken Arjuna's shackles; once more, he sweeps the Pandava legions before him. It seems the climbing sun fuels his wrath. Blood splashes everywhere in harsh noon light and the screams of those Bheeshma kills are an eerie song on that field.

Krishna cries to Arjuna, “Bheeshma will kill every soldier in your army, except you five sons of Pandu. You must save those that have come to risk their lives for you. I will ride at Bheeshma, kill him now!”

But then, sorrow is upon the Pandava. He says, “How I hate to fight my blood! Of what use is the kingdom we win by slaying our kin? I would rather go to hell than live in a world worse than hell.”

Krishna favors him with a glare. Arjuna says, “But it is too late to think of all that now. Ride at my Pitama, Krishna, I will do what I can.”

When they see Arjuna’s chariot fly to face Bheeshma, a hopeful shout goes up from the Pandava army. Arjuna’s first arrow cuts down Bheeshma’s banner, so it falls over him. The next clutch breaks the bow in the Kuru elder’s hands. Quick as thinking, Bheeshma snatches up another. With absolute genius, Arjuna breaks that weapon, as well. Bheeshma stands unarmed and vulnerable for a moment. At that critical instant, Arjuna’s fingers waver at his bowstring. His arrow whistles harmlessly past his grandfather’s ears.

In a wink, Bheeshma has another bow in his hands and fights again. Once more, he not only engages Arjuna, but kills a Pandava soldier with every other shaft; a hundred flare from his bow each moment. Arjuna’s response to his reluctant archery is pathetic. Krishna watches this for a while. Then, without a word, he flings his reins aside and leaps down from the chariot-head. Once more, the Sudarshana Chakra blazes over his hand and he stalks grimly toward Bheeshma, with the battle all around fallen still.

Soldiers shrink from Krishna. His wrath is a cosmic rictus, as if the galaxies with their limitless fires twitched in anger on his blue face. Among the Pandava soldiers, a tumultuous whisper of joy flashes. “Bheeshma is slain!” they breathe among themselves, like a sea.

Bheeshma smiles radiantly at the terrible Dark One advancing on him. It seems all the killing he did on Kurukshetra was just to provoke this rage from Krishna; so he could die at the Avatara’s hands. Bheeshma folds his palms together and cries in an ecstasy to the Incarnation, “Come, Lord, kill me now! There is nothing in all the worlds I would rather have than death at your hands.” He raises his bow, “I offer you a kshatriya’s worship, before you kill me. The world will know that Devavrata was not only the most unfortunate man on earth, but the luckiest one, as well. For, Narayana killed him with his own hands. Come, Lord!”

He is begging Krishna. All this has taken just a moment, while Arjuna

stands petrified in his chariot. Krishna raises his hand higher, the Chakra flaming over it. He takes another step forward. Then, with a cry, Arjuna falls out of his chariot. In a moment, yawned wide as a life, he flings himself at Krishna, clasping his knees. At that crucial moment, Arjuna's voice fails him. His throat is dry as deserts.

Krishna growls dreadfully. He does not look down at the warrior clinging to his legs, but tries to shake free of the Pandava. The Blue God's body glows with cold light and strange sounds come from him, like the hissing of an unimaginable hamadryad.

Then the frantic Arjuna finds his voice, "My Lord! I beg you, do not do this. Your name is as pure as Pranava; don't let this deed besmirch it. The killing I have done has darkened my mind. For a moment, I forgot who you are and who I am. Forgive me once more. I swear I will fight, Krishna and the greatest kshatriyas will stop to stare. I will fight in your name, for love of you. From this moment, I offer my war to you; accept it as my worship. Lord, save me from sin!"

Krishna sees the cloud of darkness lift away from his Pandava's heart. Reluctantly, he lowers his hand and the Sudarshana vanishes. Bheeshma still stands in his chariot, his palms folded. Krishna turns his back on the Kuru patriarch. His face still like thunder, he strides back to Arjuna's chariot and climbs into it. Tears in his eyes, Arjuna runs after him and climbs into his place. Krishna says no word, but only takes up the reins and cracks them over his gandharva horses.

An anguished roar breaks from Bheeshma, "Aaaah! Why have you abandoned me again?"

Bheeshma rides in fury at the Pandava soldiers. He is more awesome than before, but now Arjuna raises his Gandiva and gives him battle. They fight like Devas: wounding each other and killing hundreds of soldiers. Bheeshma is still tameless. As if being denied death at Krishna's hands has provoked him to frenzy, he kills twice as many men as Arjuna.

After what appears to be a few moments of supreme anarchy, but is in fact some hours and countless deaths, the sun sets. It seems he crosses the sky quickly because he cannot bear to see the killing below him, with his eyes of white fire. Numb and weary, the armies withdraw. Already, the wolves, hyenas and jackals have gathered in slaving excitement at the edge of the field and the vultures, the kites and crows in the trees that fringe Kurukshetra: for the night's feasting.

All the talk in both camps is of Bheeshma. In the Pandava camp, there is deep gloom. If Bheeshma fought again as he had today, the war would swiftly be lost. Across the field, beyond the ravening wild dogs, wolves and all that third army of carrion-eaters, which tears at the human dead on Kurukshetra under a blooming moon, Duryodhana is exultant. His eyes shine with satisfaction, as he sits with Shakuni, Dusasana and Karna in his tent. Tonight, even Karna is pleased with what Bheeshma has done. For, it saves him from what he now fears most: having to take the field against his brothers.

Duryodhana is more than certain victory will soon be his.

NINETEEN

THE LAST NIGHT OF AN AGE

On the night of that ninth day of the Mahabharata yuddha, during which the Pandavas have lost twice as many men as the Kauravas, stark despair seizes Yudhishtira. The Pandavas and Krishna sit conferring and Yudhishtira is so shaken he cannot speak. His eyes full of tears, he turns repeatedly to Krishna, but not a word can he utter. It seems everything he has lived for has been snatched from him in a day: worst of all, his faith. His brothers, who have never seen him like this, are shocked, even Bheema.

At last, Yudhishtira whispers, “We will never win, not when Bheeshma fights as he does. Another two days, at most and all our men will have perished. Krishna, do you see the jackals feasting under the moon? How horrible this war is. Hours ago, all those corpses were living men, who had mothers, fathers, wives, children and friends and rich lives. They gave their lives so we could have a kingdom. Look at them now; and we are too exhausted even to cremate them with honor. And our Pitama killed eight out of ten who died today.

No, not Arjuna or Bheema, not Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi, not all of us together can stop him. He melts our army as Agni would a pat of butter; and if he spares our lives, we will have to return to the jungle with the deaths of a million men on our conscience. What use has it been fighting this war? We should have never come back. Bheema, my brother, it is too late for revenge; too many years have elapsed between the crime and its punishment. Don’t you see, we, the avengers, are being punished instead, by our own grandfather.”

Yudhishtira’s hands shake. His words come in a rush, as if his nerve is gone and tears roll down his noble face. “We have fought as well as we can, for nine days that seem like nine lifetimes with all the killing we have seen and done. But Bheeshma is no sinner and he cannot be killed. His celibacy wraps him in impenetrable armor. I have seen Arjuna’s arrows glance off his skin like lotus stems. Our army is among the greatest the world has ever seen. We could vanquish Indra or Varuna; we could quell Kubera or Yama; but Bheeshma is invincible. His arrows are nagapasas that make ash mounds of living men.

I cannot have any more deaths on my conscience. I do not want the kingdom for which we are fighting. The only way I see for us is to abandon this mad war and go back to the peace of the jungle. As long as Bheeshma lives we will find only death and defeat on Kurukshetra; and Bheeshma is impossible to

kill. Let us not deceive ourselves. Arjuna's best efforts have been in vain and Shikhandi can go nowhere near our Pitama. A king must care for his men. When defeat is certain, he must not sacrifice them for his vanity, but retreat.

Krishna, I have caused my brothers so much misery. I had hoped that, because dharma and you are on our side, I could give them at least victory. They suffered fourteen years of exile for my foolishness. And now they must endure shameful defeat and, perhaps, death on this vile field."

Just then, the howling of some sated jackals floats in on the night breeze and Yudhishtira shivers. "Only you can save us, Krishna! You must find a way, or I will leave this war and go back to the forest. Bheeshma must die, or everything is lost."

He falls as quiet as the vast graveyard outside. After a moment's silence—and none of the others has a word to say—Krishna says, "Your brothers are full of love for their Pitama and will not kill Bheeshma. Not I: tomorrow, under Duryodhana's eyes, I will finish the patriarch and victory will be yours. Your enemies are mine, Yudhishtira and this war is mine as well. And this brother of yours, this Arjuna: for him I would cut my body in pieces to feed the jackals outside, if he asks me to. And I know that he, too, would die for me.

If you remember, before the war began Arjuna sent a brave message with Uluka to his Pitama. He swore before all the kings who are with us that he would kill Bheeshma. I love Arjuna more than he understands and I will not let him abjure himself. I will kill Bheeshma for him and it won't be hard for me."

All eyes turn to Arjuna. Krishna continues, "Of course, I do not say that Arjuna cannot kill Bheeshma himself. Far from it; for we are speaking of Indra's son, who humbled his father in battle. For such a man killing Bheeshma cannot be very hard. But a kshatriya must die to pity and kindness before he can find perfection; and perfection is a hard thing to find. It isn't that Arjuna is not archer enough to kill Bheeshma, but his heart is soft; not that he cannot kill his Pitama, but he will not. He cannot find the detachment within himself, the pure spirit of vairagya.

Indeed, all of you are too kind, too good, to be killers cold enough to cut down your grandfather. But not I, Yudhishtira; such goodness doesn't bind me. I am the warrior for you. I will do what your kind hearts don't permit you to. The bonds of this earth, its thongs of attachment, do not hold me. I am indifferent to joy and grief, good and evil, pain and pleasure. I make no difference between one enemy and another. Why, I make no difference, if you knew it, between my friend and my enemy. The world seems alike and one to me. Only my dharma

matters, for what I have been born. Blame and praise are nothing to me; I am beyond the taint of these earthly things. No sin clings to me, Yudhishtira, I am the warrior for you. Leave Bheeshma to me; I will kill him tomorrow. Sleep in peace, you shall win this war.”

Yudhishtira takes the Dark One’s hand and says, “Do you have to tell me you can kill Bheeshma? Krishna, you speak as if I don’t know who you are. You are the beginning and the end of this world; you are the seed of the universe. Without you, there would be no darkness or light, no sun, moon or stars. What is Bheeshma, what are a thousand Bheeshmas, before you? Krishna, you are not just Arjuna’s sarathy, but the sarathy of us all: the one who shows our spirits the way to light. I have no words to tell you how grateful I am that you have taken our cause for your own. But I will not allow you to perjure yourself and have the world say ever after that Krishna was a liar.

You swore to Duryodhana that you would take no part in the fighting, that you would bear no arms, shed no blood by your own hand. I will not allow you to break your sacred word; not if it costs us this war, not if it costs us our lives. Why, the very earth will crumble into dust if Krishna breaks his word. No, we must find another way to kill Bheeshma.”

Krishna smiles to hear the new determination in Yudhishtira’s voice. After a moment, the Pandava says, “I have a thought. On the first day of the war, when I went to Pitama for his blessing, he said to me that he was fighting only because he was obliged to. He said his heart lay with us; somehow, even after these nine days, I still believe him. I know of only one way in which we can kill Bheeshma. I will go to him tonight and ask him how he can be killed.” He turns to Krishna, “If you think it is the right thing to do, I will go now.”

The others seem a little bewildered by the extraordinary idea. But Krishna says at once, “Bheeshma loves you and, if you ask him earnestly, how will he not answer you? Who better than the one you hunt to tell you how he can be hunted? Come, let us go at once.”

It is past midnight and Kurukshetra is perfectly still. The wolves and jackals, hyenas and vultures, all the scavengers have finished feeding and returned to the woods. The bones they have cleaned glisten in the setting moon, as the Pandavas and Krishna thread their cautious way past skeletons, slicks of blood and lengths of intestine the carrion-eaters have disdained; they come to the sleeping Kaurava camp. No guards stir, none are posted. Only a sea of breathing ruffles the silence of the night. Quietly, the Pandavas steal into Bheeshma’s tent.

He has not slept. He says in the dark, “Duryodhana, is that you?”

Yudhishtira answers, “No, Pitama. It is I, Yudhishtira, my brothers and Krishna.”

With a cry, Bheeshma rises and lights a lamp. When the Pandavas prostrate themselves before him, he raises them up and embraces them. He takes Krishna’s hand, “Welcome, my Lord! Come, there are places for all of you to sit, for Yudhishtira, Bheema and you, Arjuna and my handsome Nakula. Wise boy Sahadeva, come sit beside me on the bed. How are you, my children? How happy you have made an old man by coming to see him.”

His eyes shine with tears. There is no trace here, any more, of the dauntless enemy they have faced the past nine days on the field; but just their doting grandfather, again, stroking their faces in love, overjoyed that they have come to see him. A pang of guilt clutches at Yudhishtira and, seeing it on his face, Krishna smiles: how hard it will be to ask the question that has brought them here!

Bheeshma says, “Arjuna, you don’t know how proud you have made me. There is no archer like you on earth and perhaps even in heaven. And Abhimanyu: what a revelation that child has been! There are times when I think he is greater than you are, or soon will be. You are a fortunate father, my child.”

Then he stops himself. He sees how they fidget and do not look at him. He says, “But tell me, what brings you here at this hour? You have come unarmed. Is there anything I can do for you?”

A lump in his throat, Yudhishtira says, “We have come to you for advice. We have come not to the Senapati of the Kaurava legions, but to our Pitama, to whom we have always turned in a crisis.”

“Tell me, child.”

“Before the war began, you said to me that victory would certainly be ours: because ours was the cause of dharma and Krishna was with us. But there is one kshatriya among our enemy whom we cannot face. As long as he fights us, we can never hope to win this war. Each morning, he rides out in his silver chariot and, bending his bow in a circle, spills our soldiers’ blood in scarlet streams. In two days more, three at most, he will have killed all our men. Yet, he is the very one who swore to me I would win the war: Pitama, that kshatriya is you.”

Bheeshma says with a smile, “And what have you come to ask me, child? Not to abandon the war, I hope, this war I am so sick of.”

“I have come to ask you something that fills me with shame.”

“Between a grandfather and his grandson there should be nothing like that. You can ask me anything and I will answer truthfully. What else am I here for? Don’t feel ashamed; ask me and if it is in my power to satisfy you, I will.”

Bheeshma strokes Yudhishtira’s head with a gnarled hand. Yudhishtira braces himself and says, “My lord, unless you die we cannot win our war. I have come to ask how we can kill you.” Then, his heart breaking, “Oh, Pitama, I must see you dead, because I must win this monstrous dharma yud-dha. Tell me how we can kill you!”

Yudhishtira covers his face with his hands and piteous sobbing shakes him. Bheeshma still strokes his head, tenderly. He says, “I fear you are right, my son. If you do not kill me, you cannot win the war. So kill me you must and quickly.”

Yudhishtira sobs, “I can’t bear to think of you dead! Is there no other way? Pitama, we love you as part of ourselves.”

Bheeshma says serenely, “There is no other way. I wish I could tell you the war would claim me in its course; that one day, soon, I will die. Alas, a lifetime of celibacy confers invincibility or something near it. Not Indra could kill me. Krishna here, yes; he can kill me, but he will have to break his vow. That he must never do; or the sun, the moon, all the stars and this earth would cease to be.”

Yudhishtira says wonderingly, “You sound as if you want to die.”

“Of course I want to die! Who in my place would not? I have seen the ruin of the house I have loved and nurtured all my life. I have seen so many generations perish and now I have seen the House of Kuru divided in war against itself, cousin against cousin. The kali yuga is upon the world. I feel its hot breath and I am still alive. I hate my life, every moment of it is poison to me. My heart is broken, many times over and I long for nothing except death. Don’t you see, Yudhishtira, my life is an endless torment and has been for a long time? The world as I knew it, the world of honor and faith, the earth of dharma, has long since passed away. Twice Krishna stood before me with his Sudarshana Chakra and I begged him to kill me. Both times, he turned away.

But tonight, I am so glad you have come to ask how you can kill me. My son, you feel ashamed you have come and guilty. But death will be sweet release for me, from a tortured life I am deeply tired of.”

They listen to him, amazed; only Krishna smiles slightly. Bheeshma sighs and goes on, “I curse my celibacy and the strength it gives me! How I loathe the very thing for which other kshatriyas envy me. But listen, children, besides

Krishna there is someone else who has the power to kill me. Arjuna.”

Tears start in Arjuna’s eyes. Bheeshma wipes them with his fingers. “Why do you cry, child? You say you love me. If you truly love me, you should be glad to set me free from the dark bondage of this life. Mortal life is cruel; a punishment for old sins we have committed and forgotten. Death is a joyful liberation. I beg you, Arjuna, kill me tomorrow and deliver me to peace. I have carried life’s burden for too long. I cannot bear it any more.”

Arjuna comes into his grandfather’s arms and sobs like a child. Bheeshma takes the Pandava onto his lap, as he used to when Arjuna was a boy! He says, “Even you cannot kill me while I am fighting, Arjuna; but if I lay down my weapons, then, yes, you can end my miserable life. In dharma, I cannot allow you to kill me, unresisting, which I would do except for the solemn word I have given Duryodhana. Yet, there is a way to make me put down my bow on the field. In your army, is a kshatriya born just to kill me. He has crossed two lives to come as my death. Set Shikhandi before you and I will not fight him: because he was once a woman.”

Dim mists fill his old eyes, sad memories. A wistful smile touches Bheeshma’s lips. “Amba was the daughter of the king of Kasi. I abducted her sisters and her on the day of their swayamvara. Ambika and Ambalika became your grandmothers, but Amba wanted me to marry her. And that could never be, because of my vow.”

Bheeshma tells them about Amba’s trials. He tells them about Siva’s boon: and how she burnt herself alive to be born as Drupada’s son. Like the rest of the world, the Pandavas have heard something of Shikhandi’s vow. Only now do they learn the whole truth. Bheeshma says, “Shikhandi remembers his last birth perfectly; so strong was Amba’s love and, when it was thwarted, her thirst for revenge. Now, she will come before me on Kurukshetra to be my deliverer. Only she has ever plumbed my heart and seen all that I have kept locked away in it.”

Yudhishtira and his brothers cannot take their eyes from Bheeshma’s creased face, for the change they see there when he speaks of Amba. Soft light is in his eyes and the great Kuru goes on, slowly, “Yes, Amba hates me and she loves me; after all these years, the two are hardly apart. Only the passion remains. Love and hate are different faces of the same obsession. I know beyond doubt, that without her I shall be chained to this unbearable life forever. Is it her hatred or her love that brings her inexorably to me?” He smiles again. “I could not tell.”

He pauses, then says briskly once more, “Yes, Arjuna, that is the only way

you can kill me. Set Shikhandi before you, when you attack me. I will not see Drupada's son before me, but Kasi Raja's daughter, who once touched my spirit as no one else ever has. She has survived every test of time, to become my death. How will I shoot arrows at a woman who has spent two lives thinking of me? How will I raise my bow against any woman? When I put down my weapon, Arjuna, you can kill me. You must!"

He squeezes Arjuna's hand, insisting. He turns to Krishna and says, "My Lord, at that moment you must not allow him to hesitate." There can be no doubt he longs to die. Bheeshma smiles at them again, "And when I am dead, victory will not elude you. Tonight, you have made an old man happy. I will sleep tonight, as I have not done for many years. My precious, noble children, your Pitama thanks you with all his heart."

They see he is crying in relief. Chastened by his tears, they kneel at his feet for his blessing. He lifts them up, one by one, embraces them, kisses them repeatedly, all of them sobbing.

Bheeshma says, "You cry in sorrow and I for joy. Dry your eyes and go back to your camp. Sleep in calm tonight, knowing tomorrow will be the dawn of your victory. Say nothing more; go now, leave me with this joy."

Heads bent, they leave his tent. As they go, they see him enveloped in light. All his cares seem to have fallen away from him; an unearthly smile is on his lips and his eyes shine. He sits there like a God who visited this world briefly and is now ready to return to his true and timeless home. Krishna is the last one out. He turns at the tent-flap, "Be joyful for ever more. You will never be born again into this world of sorrow. And you will be remembered as the greatest Kuru ever."

The Dark One raises his hand in a blessing and Bheeshma feels a tide of grace surge in his heart. He cries, "My Lord!" but Krishna has gone.

Still later, in the final yaama of the night, Arjuna comes to Krishna's tent. He sits beside him and takes his hand. Krishna sees he is crying. Arjuna says in a strangled voice, "He is my Pitama, who has always loved me. The man I am meant to kill tomorrow is my grandfather. How can I do this, Krishna?"

He sobs like the boy who once sat in his grandfather's lap. Krishna holds Arjuna against him. Gently, but with complete firmness, he says, "You have to, Arjuna. You are a kshatriya. It is your dharma to win this war for your brothers, for yourself, for Draupadi and your sons. Bheeshma's death is written at your hands and no power on earth can change that. Long ago, before you were born,

why, before he was born, it was written that Bheeshma would die by his Arjuna's arrows. However you torment yourself with guilt tonight, tomorrow you will kill him. What is fated will happen; not you, not I, can change that.

Arjuna, you are not killing him from hatred. You are not killing your Pitama, but the enemy's Senapati. You are killing him because if you do not you will lose this war and evil will rule the earth. Evil will sit upon your ancestors' throne and enslave all the generations to come. Be certain of that: either Yudhishtira or Duryodhana will inherit the throne of this world, not both of them. Bheeshma stands in the way of Yudhishtira ruling the earth in peace and dharma. If you do not kill him—and remember he longs to die—Duryodhana will win this war. Then, the coming age will be plunged in a sinister night, the rule of hell. There is more at stake here than your love for your grandfather. You must act without attachment; it is your dharma. The future of the world is in Arjuna's hands. He cannot sacrifice it, not for love of his Pitama.”

By the power of the Avatara, Arjuna has a glimpse of what is truly at stake on Kurukshetra, field of dharma. It shatters his pity in a moment, with terror. Trembling with the fleeting vision, Arjuna kneels before Krishna in the dark. His throat parched, his hair standing on end, he breathes, “My Lord! I will do it. I swear I will kill Bheeshma.”

TWENTY

THE TENTH MORNING

On the tenth morning of the war, for the first time in years Bheeshma wakes after a restful night. It seems to him that tranquillity suffuses the world and the rising sun is more brilliant, more resonant, today. The very air seems full of deep enchantment. Bheeshma worships the saffron star and is enfolded in peace. The earth wells with grace. Outside, the birds sing just for him; the trees speak to him, heart to heart. He knows they have always been full of this ecstatic speech: only, he had never heard it before. The golden Saraswati flows songs of fire, psalms of heaven. The earth is transformed around him and Bheeshma knows Krishna has blessed him. There are secret worlds hidden in the morning, calling him irresistibly. Intangible, holy waters of life purify him for the ceremony of his last day on earth: the ritual of his death.

His heart soaring as never before, Bheeshma deploys his legions on Kurukshetra. Across the field of fate, Arjuna has come out, with Krishna beside him. A vast sense of destiny fills the Pandava also. There is no doubt left in Arjuna's mind what he must do. Sorrow sits on his heart like sacrament, freeing him from fear.

Arjuna says to Krishna, "I will set Shikhandi at the head of our army and shield him from the arrows of the enemy. Let what is written in the stars be fulfilled."

Just then, another slight figure appears beside them. Arjuna starts at Shikhandi's appearance this morning. That prince wears armor and carries his bow in his hand. But his body and his face have changed; soft curves swell beneath the mail, at breast and hip. Most of all, his black eyes have changed. It is hardly a man who stands there, but a strange and lovely woman, her every limb quivering in anticipation of what she will do today. The expression on Shikhandi's face is so disturbing that Arjuna cannot look at him. Tensely, the Panchala prince stands beside them.

They set him at the head of the Pandava army. Yudhishtira forms his legions into the most sacred vyuha of all: the Deva vyuha, the phalanx of the Gods. Just behind Shikhandi, at his chariot-wheels, are Arjuna and Bheema. Directly behind him are Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons. Satyaki and Dhishhtadyumna flank the Pandavaputras; behind them, are Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva. These kshatriyas form the heart of the vyuha. They will ride just against

Bheeshma and those that guard him. Virata and Drupada lead the rest of the Pandava forces, with the Kekayas, Ghatotkacha and Dhrishtaketu.

Across the field, the Kauravas form their legions in the ancient Asura vyuha. Bheeshma leads the army. Drona is at his side, with Duryodhana and his brothers. Seeing the finest Pandava warriors all concentrated at the core of their legions, seeing Shikhandi before all the rest, Aswatthama, Bhagadatta, Kritavarman and Kripa also ring Bheeshma round today, knowing the Pandavas mean to attack the patriarch. Around them are Shakuni, the Kambhoja king and Susharma's Trigartas. Bheeshma is radiant on the field of Kurukshetra; he is like an immortal.

The conches announce the battle and yet again, the armies run at each other, shaking the sky with their roaring. This morning, Bheeshma is more terrible and fluent, than he was on the ninth day even. Duryodhana exults: victory will be his. For the Pandavas, Nakula fights resplendently today and Satyaki and Sahadeva beside him. Duryodhana wonders that his Pitama has the appearance of a youth of twenty this morning! How bright he seems, how quicksilver is his archery. All the lines of care seem to have vanished from his face, as he cuts the enemy down as he likes. Duryodhana thinks his grandfather is excited because he also scents victory.

Then, Shikhandi rides at Bheeshma and brings him up with an effulgent volley. In a ringing woman's voice, that turns the other Kauravas' heads, Drupada's strange son cries, "Fight me now, Devavrata! I have waited two lives for this day."

Bheeshma snorts at him, "You may have a man's body today, but I know who you are. I will not fight a woman!"

He begins to ride away. Shrilly, Shikhandi cries, "They say you are the greatest kshatriya of all! I know you fought your guru Bhargava to spurn Amba's love. But her love has come to Kurukshetra to bring death to you. Fight me, Bheeshma! I will kill you today."

He strikes Bheeshma with five thought-like arrows, sharp and sweet as Kamadeva's flower shafts of love. Bheeshma growls in pain like a lion; but he will not raise his bow to fight back. Swift as Shikhandi's arrows, the other Kauravas are at the patriarch's side and in front of him. Arjuna cries to Shikhandi, "Ride him down, Shikhandi, we are all with you!"

Abhimanyu, Dhristadyumna, Yudhishtira, Bheema, Nakula, Sahadeva, Satyaki, Ghatotkacha and the Kekayas ring Shikhandi round and answer the

Kaurava fire on him, ferociously. Duryodhana says to Dusasana, “They are all after the Pitama. We must keep him safe from Shikhandi at any cost. Let that be the only mission of all our kshatriyas.”

He rides to Bheeshma’s side and cries, “Look how Arjuna and Abhimanyu, Bheema, Nakula and Sahadeva cut our men down without mercy. I beg you, kill the Pandavas today and let this ghastly war end. Kill them, Pitama and save a million lives!”

Bheeshma gives him a look that is beyond contempt. He roars, “I will not kill the Pandavas! Even if I wanted to, I could not kill them. Arjuna can kill me, but not I, him. Can’t you see, blind child, who Arjuna’s sarathy is? Can anyone on earth, in heaven or hell, kill him, when Krishna drives his chariot? I swore to you that I would kill ten thousand men every day I fought. I reckon, Duryodhana, I have killed twice that number and today I will discharge what remains of my debt to your father. Then, perhaps, I will be free to die.”

Fear starts in Duryodhana’s eyes. Before he can speak, Bheeshma whirls away at the Pandava army again. He kills a hundred men; then Dhrishtadyumna and Abhimanyu attack him and, soon, Nakula, Sahadeva, Yudhishtira and Kuntibhoja. Aswatthama, Drona, Kripa and some of Duryodhana’s brothers ride between the patriarch and the Pandava heroes. Bhoorisravas sets himself stubbornly between Bheema and Bheeshma. Chitrasena fights Chekitana, Kritavarman covers Dhrishtadyumna with a rash of silver arrows. Vikarna faces Nakula; Aswatthama attacks Drupada and Virata, at once. Drona fights Yudhishtira; Arjuna and Dusasana duel. And all around these warriors, their armies battle like two seas trying to drown each other in blood.

Rishyasringa’s son Alambusa faces the brilliant Satyaki. The rakshasa uses maya, so Satyaki must summon astras against him, which light up the demon’s body when he makes himself invisible. Invoking the devastras drains Satyaki and slows his fabulous archery. Still, he begins to prevail over the tiring rakshasa. Seeing Alambusa in danger, Duryodhana sends Bhagadatta to help him, “Satyaki fights like a hundred men. Kill him today and victory shall be ours!”

Bhagadatta comes on the looming Supritika and the Pandava soldiers run from him. Trampling a hundred men, the elephant charges Satyaki. From the beast’s white back, its demon warrior, his fangs gleaming, covers the Yadava in a cloud of arrows and javelins that glow like strips of the sun and the moon. Satyaki is quick as thoughts, powerful as a Deva and he fights back resolutely. Yet, being at a height, Bhagadatta has the advantage; Satyaki has to shoot up at

the asura, often with the sun in his eyes.

Eagle-eyed Duryodhana misses nothing on the field. He sees Bhagadatta gaining over Satyaki and sensing a chance to kill one great Pandava warrior, he roars at the crack legion that always surrounds him, “Ride at Satyaki! He is tired and alone, he can be killed.”

The arrival of those kshatriyas does not cow the young Yadava. Rather, their arrows, some of which find their marks, make him fight more radiantly than ever. Shining with courage, Satyaki beats them all back. He puts Bhagadatta to flight.

Another duel rages between Arjuna and Dusasana¹ and soldiers around them stop to stare; some die as they stand absorbed. Abhimanyu and the Kambhoja king fight like two great winds trying to still each other. But one of the most enthralling contentions of the day is the one between Sahadeva and his old master, Kripa. Today, slowly, his sage pupil forces his Acharya back.

Aswatthama and Drona fight side by side. Above all the roaring and screaming around them, the father says to his son, “Do you see the omens of earth and sky? They all cry out that some calamity stalks our army. Look how Arjuna maneuvers Shikhandi, to inveigle Drupada’s prince between himself and Bheeshma. My mouth is parched and my body shivers. The kali yuga enters the world through the portal of this field! Bheema lurks near Shikhandi and Arjuna and I fear for Bheeshma’s life.”

He sees another Pandava cut his way toward Bheeshma and then another. Drona draws a sharp breath. “Fly to the Pitama! Go like the wind, Aswatthama. Don’t think of your own life, Bheeshma must be guarded at any cost. Look! They form a ring around him and hem him in from every side. Satyaki, Abhimanyu, Dhrishtadyumna, Bheema, Sahadeva and Nakula, too. Fly Aswatthama! Or they will kill him.”

Aswatthama streaks forward in his chariot at his father’s word.

TWENTY-ONE

THE BED OF ARROWS

Some final resistance to death in Bheeshma gives way. It is as if he has cleared the last shred of debt he owes Duryodhana and his blind father in Hastinapura. He feels a pure spring of peace gush within him again. There is light everywhere. The war seems like a child's distant, comical game. He feels blissful eternity brush his cheek. A beatific smile lights Bheeshma's face, with the miracle beginning in his spirit. He sees Krishna at Arjuna's chariot-head, smiling back at him in fathomless mystery and tenderness. For an interminable moment, the Blue One is all he sees.

Around him, the Kaurava warriors swarm, Aswatthama and a hundred others, determined to guard him with their lives. Sublime laughter fills Bheeshma: how amusing it is that they are so desperate to save his life, when he is as eager to die. Once more, he feels the nearness of other worlds, calling him inevitably. Bheeshma cries to Yudhishtira, "I am ready to go, my child. Come, free me!"

In the sweetest dream, he raises his bow and fights again. Thus he would spend his final moments; thus, he would die. Astonished Kaurava soldiers think they had imagined what he said to Yudhishtira. For here he is, fighting like before.

Yudhishtira cries grimly to Arjuna, "Let Shikhandi ride at Bheeshma!"

Aswatthama, Susharma and his brothers, Shalya, Dhritarashtra's sons, Drona and Kripa and a score of other Kaurava warriors set themselves between Bheeshma and the Pandavas. Arjuna rides at them, his arrows a river in the air. Hearing Yudhishtira's call, Bheema flies at Bheeshma from another side; so do Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna and Abhimanyu. The Kaurava warriors are beaten back. Bheeshma stands his ground and the Pandavas ride at him.

Suddenly, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Abhimanyu and Bheema are between Bheeshma and his protectors, holding the Kauravas away. Krishna cries, "The moment is here! Shikhandi, ride before us."

In a trance, sensing the moment Amba has waited so long for, Shikhandi flies at Bheeshma. Krishna's chariot is perfectly positioned, a hand's width behind Shikhandi's. Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva fly at their Pitama, their eyes terrible and their arrows. His grandsons surround the Kuru patriarch;

Shikhandi and Arjuna face him.

Bheeshma sees the noble Yudhishtira, who was prepared to take five towns to prevent this war. He sees Bheema, made older by the years of exile, the sinews of the wind standing taut in his great body. He sees the motherless princes, Nakula and Sahadeva. In his mind, he sees Kunti, her eyes brimming. He sees the day, fourteen years ago, when the sacrosanct sabha of Hastinapura was desecrated. He sees Draupadi before him again, sobbing in wretchedness. He hears her cry to him, ‘Pitama! You are the eldest in this sabha. How can you let this happen? Won’t you say anything to protect me?’

A sob wracks Bheeshma. He sees Arjuna and dark Krishna. His mind a storm, the mighty Kuru thinks, ‘Ah, I could kill all these young men except that Krishna watches over them. But what am I thinking? I have done enough killing for this life and ten more. My debts are paid. I will not spill another drop of blood. Enough, Devavrata, enough!’

In the echoing silence, the Pandavas move closer. Shikhandi glides closer. Vivid memories sweep Bheeshma’s mind. At the heart of these final moments, he sees his father Shantanu before him. He sees him on the day he took his oath. Shantanu says, ‘I grant you a boon, my son. You will die only when you will it yourself.’

That was it! He had forgotten. He would die only when he called his death to him. He sees Amba in Shikhandi’s chariot, lovely and young, as she was on the day he took her from her swayamvara in her father’s house. She says to him again, smiling so strangely, ‘You took me by my right hand. You are my husband. Make me your wife, Devavrata.’

A cry breaks from Bheeshma. He says in an ecstasy, ‘I had forgotten my secret over the years. I can die when I please. I will die now, this very moment!’

There are subtle voices everywhere, speaking from the sky and within his heart, unearthly voices. They say, ‘Your time has come, Devavrata.’

Bheeshma hears another voice, the tenderest of all. He hears his mother’s river-voice calling him, ‘Come, my son, come to me. You are so tired, poor child. Your body burns with the burden of the years. Set the burden down. Let me wash you in my waters of light. Let me heal you, Devavrata; come to me, my son.’

So far, the Pandavas’ arrows glance off Bheeshma like flowers. Krishna watches his face intently. The Dark One sees the moment has arrived. He cries to the waiting, trembling Shikhandi, “Your time is here, Amba. Kill him now!”

Shikhandi cries out, long and loud, a woman's thin roar and plunges at Bheeshma. In his chariot, Bheeshma throws down his bow and folds his hands to Shikhandi. A hush deep as the sky falls on Kurukshetra. From five sides, five grandsons ride at their Pitama and once his bow is down, once he has decided to die, their arrows pierce him. Still, he stands like a rock before their onslaught. Everywhere across Kurukshetra the fighting stops. Only Amba's frenzied screams break the silence; and from the depths of the Kaurava army, Duryodhana's desperate cries.

Bheeshma stands, pierced but unharmed, invincible to all the shafts with which they have shot him so far. But one Pandava has yet to shoot at his Pitama. Arjuna still hesitates. Then, Krishna roars at him in the huge silence, "Kill him, Arjuna, or the war is lost!"

At the critical moment, Arjuna cannot resist that command. His eyes bright with tears, he raises the Gandiva. With a heartbroken cry, Arjuna looses his first arrow at his grandfather. Even Shikhandi is quiet. The silence is broken by the hum of Arjuna's arrow and the soft noise it makes when it crashes into Bheeshma's body: the sound of skin and flesh being ruptured, of bones giving way, of blood spurting, all in an instant. Bheeshma roars.

Dusasana has dodged past Satyaki and Abhimanyu, to be at his grandfather's side. Such a smile lights Bheeshma's face. He shines like a lamp of heaven on that field, when Arjuna's arrow strikes him. He cries to Dusasana, "That was not Shikhandi's arrow. It was Arjuna's!"

Another shaft from the Gandiva smashes into his chest, drawing a font of blood. Bheeshma, the kshatriya, cannot help himself. He seizes a javelin and casts it at Arjuna like a bolt of light. Arjuna cuts it down. Another arrow takes his grandsire in his stomach, flinging him back against his flagstaff. Bheeshma cries out again, in agony, in joy.

"Yes! These are Arjuna's arrows. How powerful he is, stronger than I ever was. Aaahh!"

Three more shafts shatter his chest. The other Pandavas and Shikhandi shoot at him again, from every side, their barbs more telling, now that Arjuna has broken him. Bheeshma staggers in his chariot, hardly an inch of space left on his body where no arrow protrudes. Time assumes an extraordinary aspect on the field of war, when his grandsons cut their Pitama down. Each shaft with which Arjuna strikes his grandfather seems to age the day by an hour: as if the sun fled from this slaying. Shaking with grief, but his hands steady as if they belonged to someone else and his aim unerring, Arjuna strikes Bheeshma with five more

arrows, burning astras that could consume legions. They light up Kurukshetra like five suns. They flash into the Kuru patriarch's breast and light him up like a God being worshipped with lamps.

His eyes never leaving Krishna's blue face, Bheeshma falls out of his chariot with a sigh. So many shafts have pierced him that he falls not on to the earth, but on a bed of arrows! Some are longer than others and, with the weight of his body, they pierce him right through, so their points break out of his chest; blood from a hundred wounds forms a sacral pool under him. Yet, he lies in uncanny contentment, having set down his intolerable burden. His face shows no sign of the pain he is in; instead, the smile still creases it. A fine lambency enfolds his body, torn by his grandsons' arrows, ruined by Arjuna's virile arrows.

From the Kaurava soldiers the most dreadful lament rises, a great scream, as if the earth cried out at the fall of Devavrata: a cry to shake the Devas in their heaven. A shower of rain falls on Kurukshetra. Bheeshma sees stern figures of light in the twilight sky; he hears divine voices all around him. The voices speak to one another. "The son of Ganga is the greatest of men. How has he fallen during the dakshinayana, when the sun moves south? This is not an auspicious time to die."

A pale flight of birds lights the dim sky. A flock of luminous swans flies down to the fallen patriarch. Ganga sent the rishis who live in dhyana beside the Manasarovara to her dying son and they have come as swans.

Bheeshma says in a whisper, "Devavrata has fallen, but he is not dead. My spirit will stay in this body until the sun resumes his northern course. Tell my mother I must not die before uttarayana, if I am to be who I was before."

The swans rise away from the earth with his message. The soldiers watch them, until they vanish in the deepening night. Again, Kurukshetra echoes with bitter wailing. Duryodhana's brothers are afraid now; they sob like children. Some of the Kauravas faint at the sight of Bheeshma like that. Panic rips through the Kaurava army, while the Pandava soldiers shout their jubilation.

Bheeshma lies with his eyes shut, his head lolling back. Near him stands Duryodhana, stricken.

When the patriarch fell, Dusasana roared in shock, turned his chariot and dashed away from the field in terror. He met Drona riding toward the alarm.

Drona shouted, "What is it, Dusasana? What is the outcry about?"

Dusasana panted, "Pitama has fallen!"

Drona keeled over. Some men had to rush back to the camp to fetch water and salts, to revive the Acharya. When Drona awakes, the first command he gives is to sound the conches to stop the fighting. Like sleepwalkers, the Kaurava soldiers move slowly back to their camp. One by one, the kshatriyas from both sides begin to arrive at Bheeshma's side. They come divested of armor and weapons: to pay homage. He lies there on his bed of arrows, like Brahma surrounded by the Devas. Kauravas and Pandavas alike weep, but not Duryodhana.

Daylight fades swiftly from the world and torches are lit around the patriarch. His body still glows with its own luster. His voice low and hoarse, Bheeshma says, "My head hangs loose, I need a pillow."

At once, a score of men run to the camps and fetch the softest silk pillows and bolsters. The patriarch turns his face from them in disgust. "These are fit for sleeping on at home. I am a kshatriya fallen on the battlefield. Arjuna, give me a pillow for a warrior's head."

Arjuna raises the Gandiva in the gloom. Three arrows flash down into the earth behind Bheeshma. Arjuna kneels beside his Pitama, gently lifts his head and sets it on those shafts. Bheeshma sighs, "This is a pillow for a kshatriya."

His breath comes hard. He shuts his eyes and falls silent. After some moments, he flutters them open again. He beckons to the princes to come nearer. Bheeshma says, "I will wait for uttarayana, before my life leaves my body, like a friend leaving his dearest friend. Have a ditch dug around me, so I can worship the sun, undisturbed by the scavengers, until Surya Deva returns to his northern course."

Duryodhana has called his royal physicians to attend to the fallen patriarch. They have come to remove the arrows from his body and smear his wounds with potent herbs. Bheeshma sees them standing at his side. He sees Duryodhana beside them, speechless for once. Bheeshma says, "Reward them for coming, my child and send them away. I have no need of physicians. I have fallen as a kshatriya should and here I am on a bed of arrows, which is also as it should be. These shafts are sacred to me. They must remain in my body and be burnt with it when I am dead."

The physicians are sent away. Bheeshma is tired and shuts his eyes again¹. His breath heaves, shallow and rasping. He must rest if he is to live to see the sun turn north again. Night advances and, one by one, the kings and warriors return to their tents. By flickering lamplight, Duryodhana keeps a lone vigil near his grandfather. The ancient kshatriya seems to drift away, at times and his

breath is low. Then he opens his eyes and stares at the moon and stars above.

Duryodhana sees his Pitama in intolerable pain, which he fears will force his spirit from his body. The Kaurava sits frozen in the night, unable even to cry for the tumult of grief he feels. Then, Bheeshma says through bloody lips, “Water! Duryodhana, I am parched with thirst.”

Duryodhana rushes away and brings sweet water and syrups and wines that were his grandsire’s favorites. When he kneels to offer them to Bheeshma, the old man says, “No. None of these will quench the thirst that burns me. Send for Arjuna, only he can give me the water I crave.”

Arjuna comes running when he gets word. In agony now, but his face still bright, Bheeshma manages to smile at him. Arjuna kneels beside him. Bheeshma whispers, “Water, my child, only you can give me the water I want.”

Arjuna runs back to his tent for the Gandiva. He murmurs a mantra to invoke the parjanyastra, the weapon of rain. Arjuna drills an arrow into the ground beside Bheeshma. The earth trembles under them. She opens in a cleft deep as a hand and from it a crystal spring wells, like amrita and scented like nectar. The water rises into Bheeshma’s lips, bathing his face, letting him drink where he lies, whenever he wants. The holy spring is the Ganga herself and his mother slakes the raging thirst of Shantanu’s dying son: the thirst of his soul.

All the Pandavas and Kauravas have returned to Bheeshma’s side, all his grandsons. The light on his face is brighter, after he has drunk. The water seems to have quenched his pain, as well. Bheeshma smiles more easily at them. He says, “Only Krishna and Arjuna know the mantra for the parjanya. They are Nara Narayana. Duryodhana my son, come closer, listen to what I have to tell you. Let my death not be in vain; let your enmity with your cousins end with it. You cannot vanquish Nara and Narayana. Look how Arjuna has cut me down, as not even my guru Bhargava could. Give Yudhishtira back half the kingdom, or you and your brothers will perish. I am a dying man and as I love you, you must listen to me. End this war tonight.”

The breath rattles in his chest and Bheeshma cannot go on. Duryodhana’s eyes smolder in the torchlight and, by the look in them, his dying grandfather knows his plea has been fruitless. Agony sears through him again and he shuts his eyes over his twin torments: the one which feeds on his body and the other that feeds on his heart even as he lies dying. Bheeshma drifts away on a dream of his mother. Tenderly she caresses him, wafts him out of reach of the anguish of the earth.

Seeing him suspended between pain and forgetfulness, his grandsons touch his feet and leave him on his bed of arrows, watched by the guards they have posted around him. Bheeshma must lie on Kurukshetra for sixty days and nights more, before the sun turns north at the solstice and he can finally leave the world.

TWENTY-TWO

‘I NEVER HATED YOU’

In his tent, Karna gets news of Bheeshma’s fall. At midnight, Duryodhana comes to Karna’s tent. Duryodhana has not shed a tear yet. But when he sees his friend, when Karna rises silently to embrace him, the Kaurava breaks down. He sobs piteously in Karna’s arms.

Then, Duryodhana goes limp and Karna gently leads him to his bed and makes him lie on it. He pulls off his sandals, loosens his clothes and sits beside him, stroking his face. The Kuru prince shuts his eyes and mercifully falls into sleep. Now and again, a sob wracks him; but he does not wake up.

Karna sits in the dark, gazing at his sleeping friend. He knows that, with the sun the next day, he must take the field against his brothers. Bheeshma had fallen and no one stood between Karna and the war. Seeing Duryodhana, curled up like a child in his bed, gives him strength: in his moment of crisis, the Kaurava had not gone to his uncle or his brothers for comfort, not even to Dusasana. He had come to Karna.

Thus, Karna sits for a long time. The moon sinks in the west, dawn is not more than three hours away. Suddenly, an irresistible compulsion to go out into the night seizes him, as if a voice called him clearly across silvery Kurukshetra. Silence reigns over the last yaama of the night. Karna leaves Duryodhana asleep and comes into the open. Exhausted with the day’s battle and most of all, with the shock of Bheeshma’s fall, the Kaurava army sleeps like the dead. Karna makes his way stealthily through corpses strewn everywhere like large dolls, toward the torches that show where Bheeshma lies on his exceptional bed, in the long wait for the sun to turn north again.

Karna’s body is in soft upheaval; he is terrified to approach Bheeshma. He knows the patriarch never liked him. He remembers all the times the old man put him down in the sabha of Hastinapura. Even the memory of Bheeshma’s acerbic voice makes him shudder. But Karna knows Bheeshma is as much his grandfather as Duryodhana or Arjuna’s and this brings him inevitably to the fallen elder. The guards around Bheeshma have dozed off. Karna pads forward, hoping he can pay his respects to a sleeping warrior and steal away.

Bheeshma’s eyes are shut on his great sad face. Karna creeps closer, like a thief in the night. But, when he is near enough to see the magnificent body stuck

with a hundred arrows and the blood that has flowed and congealed in the dark pool below it, a sob breaks from Kunti's eldest son. All his resistance gives way. Karna falls at his Pitama's feet, bathing them in tears.

Bheeshma's eyes flicker open, they are full of light. He breathes, "Who are you? Your tears burn me more than these arrows. Why do you cry at my feet? Come near me, let me see your face. My head is full of fire and I cannot turn it to look at you. Why don't you speak?"

Karna rises and crosses to where Bheeshma can see him; but his face remains hidden from his grandfather. Bheeshma says again, "Your form is familiar, mighty child. Who are you?"

Karna breathes, "It is I, Karna! Whom you hate, my lord. I would have come earlier, except that I feared what you might say to me when the others were here. But I had to come; my heart would not be still until I did. Forgive me if I cause you distress."

Karna sees tears fill the old man's eyes and trickle down his face. Bheeshma raises a hand to call him nearer, as if to whisper in his ear. Instead, he reaches out with both his arms to embrace the amazed warrior and kisses him fervently! Bheeshma says, "I have never hated you, my poor child. How could I, when I have always known you are my grandson?"

Karna gasps.

"Long ago, Vyasa told me. But I had to keep the secret and so did Vidura, who also knows. Ah, my son, whenever I spoke harshly it was only to curb your pride, so it may not lead you to ruin. You must remember I knew the Pandavas were your brothers. How could I listen to you raving against them? If you knew who you really were, you would never say such things; or goad Duryodhana on as you did. Karna, if you were not with him, Duryodhana would never have dared fight the Pandavas for fear of Arjuna. But he believes you are the greater archer; and, Suryaputra, perhaps he is not wrong. Why do you think I made it a condition you would not fight, while I did? Not because I hate you, noble child, but because I could not bear to see you go to war against your brothers. Oh, I don't dislike you at all, Karna. I love you as much as I do Duryodhana or Yudhishtira."

The old man strokes Karna's hand. "My poor, poor child. God alone knows why, but from the first day of your life, fate has been cruelest to you. But now, everything is clear. I beg you, cross the field of death; go and join your brothers. Possibly, that will shock Duryodhana into abandoning this insane war. You are

the eldest of your generation. Let it be you that makes peace and my dying fruitful.”

Karna’s face is ashen. “Pitama, you are the last of the Kurus, the end of a noble line. None of us is your blood. Perhaps, that is why this house is at war against itself: because the last of the Kurus had no sons. And because the kali yuga is upon us. Pitama, how I wish I could do as you ask, but it is too late for that. We cannot fight fate: the destiny of the very earth. The age grows dark and I do not have the strength to stand against time; or the strength to betray Duryodhana, no, not for the noblest cause.

I love him more than a brother. Once, I said to him, ‘I will do anything to please you: even what seems impossible. I will give my life for you, for that is how you have loved me.’

Pitama, I have never broken my word to anyone. How can I betray my only friend? When the Gods decide to destroy a man, who can save him? I love the Pandavas now, more than I ever hated them. But I must fight them on cursed Kurukshetra and die on this field. I have no doubt I will die and Duryodhana will lose this war. Every omen cries out that Dhritarashtra’s sons and all those who fight for them will perish. Isn’t it enough that Krishna is with my brothers: what force on earth can withstand them? I know who the Dark One is and he has already decided all our fates.”

He pauses. Bheeshma sighs, but still keeps Karna’s hand in his own. Karna resumes, “The world thinks of me as a sutaputra. But you know who I am and now I do as well. A kshatriya must die on the field of battle and I mean to die on Kurukshetra. My life has been full of shame. Bless me, Pitama, that at least I die an honorable death!”

Bheeshma draws Karna down and embraces him again. Karna says, “Forgive me for all the harsh things I ever said to you.”

“My child, my child, how can a grandfather hold anything against his grandson? There is nothing to forgive. You are a great kshatriya. You are Arjuna’s equal, his superior. Your mind is also noble, my son, as noble as Yudhishtira’s. I see now that the kali yuga has indeed entered the world. The old ways must pass on and vileness and evil replace them. Not you or I are responsible, not Duryodhana or Yudhishtira. Fate herself conspires to darken the age. Who are we to fathom her purposes, or to oppose her?”

He lays his aged hands on Karna’s head, as the Suryaputra kneels before him. “I bless you, child, with all my heart I bless you. Few men have suffered as

you have and so alone. I bless you to die like a kshatriya on the field of war and find heaven for yourself. Do your dharma as a warrior; die for your friend if you must, there is no shame in it. And your name will be remembered and your fame last as long as the stars shine down on the world. For no fault of your own, you have been tormented to your very end. And I fear you will find death even before I leave this broken body. But I will see you in swarga soon, my prince! As soon as it is uttarayana again.”

Karna folds his hands to his grandsire. He says, “I have a boon to ask you, Pitama.”

“Ask me for anything I can still give you.”

“Let my secret die with me. I fear you may be tempted to tell Duryodhana or Yudhishtira who I am, to stop the war. I beg you not to.”

Bheeshma smiles; love for this grandchild of his fills his heart. “When you are dead I must tell Duryodhana and no one else, who you really were. He must know how much you loved him. But I will make him swear the Pandavas don’t learn of it.”

Karna’s tears fall on his Pitama. Bheeshma clasps him, kissing him repeatedly, whispering, “Noble, noble child! There is no kshatriya like you on earth. Of all my grandsons, I am proudest of my Karna.”

Kissing his grandfather’s hand one last time, his own heart full, Karna rises and walks away. His eyes streaming yet, he finds his tent in the Kaurava camp. He sees Duryodhana as he left him an hour ago, curled in sleep. Karna caresses his friend’s face lightly with his fingers, then lies down beside him. Through an opening in the tent-flap he can see a lone, bright star in the sky from which the moon has sunk. He is at peace after seeing Bheeshma. The sight of that solitary star fills Karna with quiet joy. Unaware that this is the first night of the kali yuga, he falls asleep beside Duryodhana.

BOOK SEVEN

DRONA PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

DRONA, SENAPATI

The eleventh morning of the war dawns, cold and clear and despair grips the Kaurava army. As long as Bheeshma had led them, they could always win the war. Now he lay on his strange deathbed, waiting for the sun to return to his northern path. As Sanjaya said to his stricken king, blind Dhritarashtra, the Kaurava army is like the sky without a sun, the earth without its verdure, speech without refinement, a woman who has lost her husband, a dry river in summer, like a mountain-cave empty of its lion and his roar!

As naturally as seasons change, when their times come, the Kauravas turn to Karna for assurance. On that eleventh morning of the war of dharma, the army of Hastinapura resounds not with blasting conches or drumrolls, but a single name cried out by a million throats.

“Karna!” they roar. “Karna to beat the Pandavas!”

In his tent, Karna hears them with a grim smile. He is putting on mail, readying himself for battle.

Duryodhana and his brothers arrive in Karna’s tent. Duryodhana puts his arms around him and begins to cry again, as do all Dhritarashtra’s sons. Karna comforts them like an older brother.

“Nothing is certain in this fleeting world; not when we live, or die. Bheeshma has fallen when all of you guarded him with your lives: when Drona and Aswatthama, Duryodhana, Kripa, Dusasana, Shalya and a thousand others watched over him. His time had come and no power on earth could save the Pitama. Yet, it is easier for you to imagine the sun fallen out of the sky.”

He puts his hands on Duryodhana’s shoulders, “I know why you have come to me this morning. Look, I have put on armor. Duryodhana here I am, ready to die for you. The enemy is powerful: righteous Yudhishtira, tameless Bheema, brilliant Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva who fight like Devas. They have Satyaki, who is hardly less of an archer than Arjuna himself. Then, the most formidable, if the youngest: Abhimanyu who has both Krishna and Arjuna’s blood in his veins. We must not forget Drupada and the fire-prince Dhrishtadyumna, whose valor no one has fathomed. And their fierce, loyal legions.

This is the enemy. We would be fools if we deceived ourselves that they will be easy to vanquish. We must do our best and if we win, the world shall be

yours. If we lose, we will still have earned immortal fame for ourselves. Let us not be anxious about how the war will end, but take courage in both hands and leave the rest to fate. Let us go and fight!”

How his dark eyes shine. Duryodhana thinks Arjuna will not live much longer and he is consoled. Of ambition and mercy, ambition will always rule the Kaurava’s heart. Duryodhana returns to his own tent. Karna goes again to his dying grandsire. Now he comes as a warrior, in his chariot, wearing mail and armed. He alights and approaches Bheeshma. Folding his hands, he says quietly, “I mean to follow you, Pitama. You have laid your life down for Duryodhana and so will I. Bless me again.”

He kneels beside Bheeshma. Bheeshma takes his hand, “You are Duryodhana’s only hope. Fight as well as you can: that you must do in kshatriya dharma. Karna, I have thought long about you and I have no doubt you are the greatest of all my grandsons.” He lowers his voice, “Let your death be as noble as you are. I bless you that your fame will live forever, after you die and it shall be blemishless; and when you fall, Kurukshetra will be like a mother’s lap to you. Men of generations too distant to dream of, men in the heart of the kali yuga will name their sons after you. I bless you that you will die with a smile on your lips and joy in your heart. Noble Karna, after everything you have endured, you will never be born again into this world of sorrow. You will have moksha, my child.”

Bheeshma lays a loving palm on Karna’s head. Karna takes the dust from his Pitama’s feet and walks back to his chariot. Splendid as his father, Karna rides up to the Kaurava army. They see him like a sun risen for them, after the fractured night. A huge cheer goes up, echoing over Kurukshetra, “Karna! Great Karna for victory!”

“Karna is with us now, how long will the Pandavas live?”

A smile on his drawn face, Duryodhana welcomes his friend, taking his hands. “You tell me what we should do next. My mind is dark with grief and I cannot reason clearly. We must have a Senapati for our army, but I can’t think who it must be.”

Adroitly, he leaves the decision to Karna. Karna says, “All these kshatriyas are fit for the charge; each is the others’ peer. But if you choose one, the others will feel slighted. Yet, is there a warrior among us who towers over the rest in both age and experience; only he can command respect from us all. Duryodhana, let Drona be your Senapati.”

Duryodhana goes to his master. “Acharya, you have been as close to us as our Pitama. It is only just that his mantle passes to you. I beg you, assume command of the army of Hastinapura.”

Drona, the brahmana, is pleased no end. He says, “I will lead your army as best I can.”

Duryodhana calls for holy water and Drona is consecrated Senapati of the Kaurava army. When Karna stands beside the Acharya, the soldiers feel a surge of hope. They say, “Karna is a better archer than Arjuna. He can win this war for us.”

“Remember the tournament in Hastinapura. He showed he was the better bowman.”

“He has no love for the Pandavas, as Bheeshma did. He will kill them for Duryodhana.”

Drona deploys his soldiers in the shakata vyuha, phalanx of the cart; while, Dhrishtadyumna forms the krauncha vyuha once more. The Pandavas peer across Kurukshetra at some excitement among the Kaurava legions. They see Karna, bright as a God, take the field for the first time. He is as pure, as radiant as the sun springing from the dragon Rahu’s mouth.

Before he rides to the van of his army, Drona says to Duryodhana, “I will fight all the Pandavas, but there is one man I will not face, one kshatriya you must shield me from. For he was born to kill me.

“Dhrishtadyumna, my lord?”

“Keep Drupada’s fire-prince away from me, if you want me to stay alive.” The guru smiles at his sishya. “I will not pretend I am not delighted to be your Senapati. I want to do something exceptional for you, to show my gratitude.”

Duryodhana reflects on this for just a moment, before he says, “Can you take Yudhishtira captive and bring him to me alive?”

Drona’s eyes flash. “If you mean to kill him, let it be in battle, not by deceit.”

Duryodhana laughs. “Oh no, Acharya! Would Arjuna spare our lives for an hour if I did that? And even if we kill all the Pandavas, Krishna will burn us with his Chakra. No, if you bring Yudhishtira to me, I will challenge him to another game of dice. He will lose and we can send him and his brothers to the jungle again and end this war.”

Drona considers this and likes it even less than the war. But he must keep the word he has given. “If you can lure Arjuna away, I will bring Yudhishtira to you.”

Duryodhana knows how fond his Acharya is of the Pandavas. To hold him to his word, he has it proclaimed to their army that Drona will take Yudhishtira alive. The news travels quickly to the Pandavas. Arjuna cries in fury, “Have the great sunk so low? But we shall see how they take my brother, when I won’t leave his side for a moment.”

TWO

THE ELEVENTH DAY

The conches boom again. Bheeshma shuts his eyes and drifts away on a vision of another world. The Kaurava army whirls into battle: a great wheel of men. The Pandavas' krauncha swoops to stop its spinning advance. Sahadeva, who has sworn to kill Shakuni, meets him in a duel. Storming up at the head of the Pandava force today, Dhrishtadyumna confronts Drona before any other Kaurava warrior can intervene. Duryodhana's brother Vivimsati rides straight at Bheema, but he does not take him unawares. With a roar Bheema charges Vivimsati, killing his horses, shattering his chariot and the Kaurava flees on foot.

Bhoorisravas faces Shikhandi. To Shikhandi, this is the first day of a new life: nothing remains of Amba's steaming memories, of her single obsession. Serenity sits on the Panchala prince's heart; son of a great father that he is, he gives Bhoorisravas a scorching fight, turning the heads of the soldiers around them.

Some way off, black Ghatotkacha and pale green-eyed Alambusa are locked in a battle of sorcery. They fight with maya, crying chillingly at each other in the tongue of wild rakshasas: dark curses that no one else can understand. The Avanti brothers Vinda and Anuvinda meet Chekitana in a fervid duel. Blood flies in the day's young sun and the spotless sky echoes with the screams of those cut down. After ten days of war, a skin of dry blood covers Kurukshetra and fresh crimson splashes brightly on to this russet patina.

Virata is the first Pandava warrior to face Karna in battle. Holding their breath, the Kaurava soldiers watch to see if their new hero is indeed the archer they have heard he is. He exceeds all their expectations. His hands are like light, his aim is unerring and he is more fluent than Arjuna. It seems he only looks at an enemy and arrows flare from his bow by themselves. A deep roar of excitement rises from the Kaurava ranks.

Yet, another kshatriya eclipses even Karna: Abhimanyu. He hunts like a gandharva on Kurukshetra and no one can stand before him. Breaking easily through the rim of the shakata vyuha, he kills a hundred Kaurava soldiers. Duryodhana's warrior, the king Paurava, surprises Abhimanyu from a flank, smashing his bow. Abhimanyu draws his sword and leaps down from his chariot. Seizing Paurava by his hair, Arjuna's son lifts him into the air and flings him down to the ground.

Sword in hand, Jayadratha comes to challenge Abhimanyu. The prince is eager to show off his sword skills. On the ground between their two chariots, they hew at each other, their weapons ringing together in an efflorescence of sparks. Jayadratha is a fine swordsman; but though he has twice Abhimanyu's bulk, the slender prince beats him back with dazzling speed. He breaks Jayadratha's blade, that king runs back to his chariot.

Word spreads of Abhimanyu's havoc. Back in his chariot, the prince picks up his bow again and a rash of arrows leaps from it. One Kaurava warrior matches Abhimanyu shaft for shaft: Shalya harries him. They fight a blinding duel. Shalya invokes an astra; burning with secret fires, the missile flames at Abhimanyu. Arjuna's son catches it in his hands! In a wink Abhimanyu fits it to his bowstring and shoots it back at Shalya. The astra explodes, killing Shalya's sarathy, consuming his chariot and flinging him out.

Unhurt, but dazed and furious, Shalya seizes up a mace and runs at Abhimanyu. The slight youth cannot hope to match the massive Shalya with this weapon. Yet, honor demands that he fight. As Abhimanyu hefts his own gada, another kshatriya arrives between Shalya and him, roaring a challenge. It is Bheema, swinging his mace. Shalya turns away from Abhimanyu to the equal opponent.

Like a tiger and an elephant, they circle each other. The soldiers around them step back to give them room. Shalya and Bheema battle like beasts out of a mythic wilderness. Their maces clash like earthquakes and storms of blue sparks fly around them and they look like trees covered by fireflies at twilight. For an hour, they fight, exhilaratingly. Neither gives an inch, smashing out wildly and, also, with superb control. Until, with the loudest roar of the day, Bheema crashes such a blow on Shalya's mace that the king's weapon ignites in his hands. Bheema's next blow takes Shalya on his head. Shalya's knees buckle. Out of nowhere, Kritavarman appears, sweeps the fallen kshatriya into his chariot and flits away.

Lusty cheering breaks out among the Pandava soldiers. The moral victory has been theirs and Shalya has escaped death by a whisker. Karna's son Vrishasena takes the field with his father today and he is a sudden comet appeared on Kurukshetra. Nakula's son, Satanika, faces Vrishasena; he can hardly match Karna's ferocious boy. Seeing him in mortal danger, Draupadi's other sons come flying to their brother's rescue. Like five sunflares, they attack Vrishasena, beating him back. Then, Aswatthama appears at his side and together, those two hold the Pandavaputras at bay. But how graceful the five are,

how handsome!

This eleventh day, the Kauravas have lost many more soldiers than the Pandavas. No Bheeshma holds up Pandu's sons any more and Bheema, Abhimanyu, Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna and Arjuna devastate the enemy. To stop them, somehow, to turn the tide on his first day as Senapati of Hasti-napura's army, Drona thinks he must take Yudhishtira captive. He sees the eldest Pandava fighting on his own, with Arjuna nowhere near him. Drona cries to his sarathy, "Ride at the white parasol! Go like the wind."

They fly at Yudhishtira's chariot. Drona's bow streams five fires and no enemy soldier dares stand before him. In a moment, they are upon Yudhishtira. The Pandava turns to fight, but he is hardly a match for Drona with surprise on his side. The Acharya breaks his bow. He rides at Yudhishtira's chariot; but Dhrishtadyumna, who misses nothing, flashes between them. Arrows fly like locusts between the chariots. With wonderful skill and some fear as well, Dhrishtadyumna contains Drona as a shore the sea.

Shikhandi and Uttamauijas are at hand. Drona beats them back in the frenzy that takes him. Draupadi's sons try to intervene, but they cannot stand even a few moments against the raging Acharya. He is possessed. His students see him like this for the first time: truly terrible. Dhrishtadyumna sees the peril to Yudhishtira and fights desperately well. But he and his warriors are being pushed back, inexorably, farther and farther from the Pandava king.

The Pandava soldiers panic. Someone cries, "The war is lost. No one can stop Drona, he will take Yudhishtira today!"

Drona's chariot comes nearer and Yudhishtira waits helplessly to be killed or taken by his master. Suddenly, a cry splits the arrow-thick air; the rumble of a great chariot drowns every other noise. Pale gandharva horses seem to fly above the ground, their reins held taut in the dark hands of an Avatara. The shimmering chariot appears out of the dusk and at the last moment, darts between Yudhishtira and Drona. In its wake, it leaves a thousand dead; so, in the gloom, it seems like some uncanny ship fording a lake of blood. Arjuna falls on Drona like an army.

In Arjuna's mind turbulent images rise: first, of a day when a stranger fetched a little vita out of an old well for some young princes; then, of Bheeshma fallen just yesterday; and finally another day, fourteen years ago, when he and his brothers lost everything. How could his Acharya be an accomplice to such treachery? After all that had happened, how could he now stoop to this? In that moment, Arjuna loses a reverence he has nurtured over a lifetime. Drona had been bought with position and he falls in his sishya's eyes. Blind with anger and

even more with grief, Arjuna flies at his master who taught him so much of what he knows. Drona cannot face him. The Pandava shames his guru on Kurukshetra, driving him off like some common soldier. The Acharya's opportunity to take Yudhishtira is lost; worse, he knows he has lost Arjuna's respect.

The sun sets in sorrow over the field of the dead. Conches sound to call the armies back to their camps. Though Drona has fought as never before, the eleventh day also belongs to the Pandavas, if narrowly.

THREE

SUSHARMA

Duryodhana is frantic. In front of the other kings and his brothers, he says to Drona, “You asked me if you could do something exceptional for me and I told you to take Yudhishtira alive. You had every chance to take him today, but, Acharya, you didn’t keep your word.”

Drona bristles at the censure. He says coldly, “I said I would take Yudhishtira, if Arjuna was far from him. The task of keeping Arjuna away was yours. If Arjuna had not descended on me, Yudhishtira would be here now, bound hand and foot.”

Susharma says, “We Trigartas have old enmity with Arjuna. All these days we have tried to kill him, but his blue sarathy is as elusive as the wind in the trees. Tomorrow we will challenge Arjuna as soon as battle begins and lure him away to the south of the field; there, either he or we will die. Drona should have all the time he needs to take Yudhishtira.”

Duryodhana cries, “An excellent plan! And if you can kill Arjuna while the Acharya captures Yudhishtira, not even Krishna will deny us victory. But to make resolutions here in the safety of the camp is easy. I have seen you face Arjuna many times, Susharma and each time you Trigartas fled from him.”

Susharma’s face twitches. “We will swear an oath by Agni that either Arjuna or the Trigartas will live at twilight tomorrow: but not both.”

At once, Duryodhana orders the sacred fire fetched. The Trigarta brothers—Susharma, Satyar-atha, Satyavarma, Satyasu, Subahu, Sudhanva and Satyadharma—swear a solemn oath that they would not leave the field of war unless either Arjuna or they were dead. With this oath, they are called the Samsaptakas. After the grim brothers return to their tents, Duryodhana says to Drona, “With Arjuna out of the way, I hope you won’t balk at taking Yudhishtira tomorrow.”

Drona says woodenly, “If Arjuna is kept away, I will bring Yudhishtira to you alive.”

He also walks out of Duryodhana’s tent, disgusted at what noble war has come to, at what he himself has fallen to. Duryodhana smiles at Shakuni, Dusasana and Karna.

Dawn of the twelfth day; Drona forms his legions in the garuda vyuha and, across the field, Dhrishtadyumna has chosen the chandrakala, the phalanx of the crescent moon. Battle begins, the two forces fall at each other. Arrows cover the sky, fingers of orange flames in the early light. Swords and maces gleam in the morning and again Bheeshma on his arrow-bed hears the roar and the scream of the slayer and the slain.

Arjuna sees Susharma and his brothers with their men at the southern wing tip of the Kaurava eagle; usually, they would come from the rear as the day's battle grew. He sees all their burning gazes fixed just on him. He sees Duryodhana staring intently at the Trigartas and guesses what is afoot. Arjuna says to Yudhishtira, "The Trigartas mean to challenge me again and I cannot refuse to fight them."

As he speaks, Susharma hails him harshly across the field, "Arjuna! Come and fight us. We have sworn by Agni that today either you or we, but not both, will live to see the sun set. We are the Samsaptakas, Arjuna and we challenge you!"

Yudhishtira is alarmed. "You must stay beside me, Arjuna. I don't care to be taken by Drona!"

"I cannot refuse a kshatriya's challenge. But here is Satyajit: let him be your custodian today. As long as he has life in him, not Drona or anyone will come near you. But if he should be killed, Yudhishtira, promise me, my brother, that you will be a coward for all our sakes and flee."

"Drona will not take me, Arjuna. Answer Susharma's challenge, let this be the Trigartas' last day on earth."

"Bless me!" cries Arjuna.

Leaving Yudhishtira in the care of Satyajit, who is Drupada's brother and no less a kshatriya than him, Arjuna says to Krishna, "Come, my Lord, let us ride at the Trigartas."

FOUR

BHAGADATTA'S ELEPHANT

An army by themselves, the Trigartas have formed a crescent of their own beyond the southern wing tip of the garuda vyuha. Arjuna rides alone against that legion of thousands, like a lion at a vast herd of deer. Duryodhana sees Arjuna's white horses flying like foam across a wave and cries to Drona, "Our plan is working! Arjuna rides at Susharma's men. Take Yudhishtira, Acharya, no one can stop you now."

Susharma has brought his legion to the south, a fair way beyond the main Kaurava army. From here, Arjuna will not be able to ride back in a hurry to his brother's side. They are so far that he will not be able to hear a call for help. As they draw near, Arjuna turns to Krishna, "Do you see the smiles on their savage faces? Are they so glad I will send them to hell, that they smile?"

Arjuna lifts his Devadatta, adorned with gold and blows a deep note on it. For a moment, the Trigarta force stands paralyzed; their horses' eyes bulge wildly and the beasts pass dazed in fear. Then a thousand conches' bass answers his call, a thousand arrows flash at his chariot, obscuring the face of the sun. Arjuna replies with an astra that spumes up as a calid fireball, then, falls on the enemy in a hundred burning shafts. Every arrow claims a life: a hundred Trigarta soldiers are immolated.

The Trigartas have sworn a solemn vow and they shoot bank upon bank of dark arrows at Krishna and Arjuna, falling on them like swarms of bees upon a flowering tree, engulfing them. Because of Krishna's chariotry and the white horses' speed, the Pandava's chariot is a hard target to find. Their finer marksmen's barbs Arjuna cuts down with his own fire.

One of the Trigarta's bravest kshatriyas, Subahu of the gifted hands, rides out of the throng to face Arjuna alone. He is an excellent bowman and wounds both Krishna and Arjuna. Roaring, Arjuna breaks the bow in Subahu's hand, then severs the hand from its wrist in a red font. Screaming in horror, Subahu flees. Susharma himself dashes forward with ten of his truest archers. But Arjuna is a warrior of another ilk. As in a nightmare, Susharma sees Sudhanva's head cut from his neck by the Pandava's golden-winged arrow, its scream stilled on its lips. Turning, he sees the other nine around him have met the same fate, in the space of a wish.

Arjuna fights as if from another dimension; where he has all the time he needs to shoot at the enemy, while he is protected from their arrows by a threshold they cannot breach. He seems to defy nature: his one to their thousand is more than they can subdue. He burns them at will; the common Trigarta soldiers panic and want to run back to the main Kaurava army. Susharma roars at them, “Stand and fight, cowards! You have sworn to kill or be killed. I will shoot you down myself if you run.

And he sends a few warning arrows after the deserters, so they scramble back to the crescent. Susharma cries, “Shoot all at once! Cover them in a night of arrows.”

The wind whistles toward Arjuna from behind the Trigarta legion and suddenly a dark cloud of arrows drifts at him as if at midday an unnatural night has fallen over Kurukshetra. It is an endless cloud. The Trigartas now shoot in waves; and in terror: so they can hide in that darkness from the Pandava. Such an impenetrable darkness; Arjuna can hardly see his hands. In fury, he summons his first greater astra, the weapon of Tvashtar. He looses that missile, then blows a rolling blast on the Devadatta.

Tvashtar’s astra is a weapon of hallucinations. Every Trigarta soldier sees the Pandava beside him. They fall on each other, thinking they are attacking Arjuna. Thousands die in the surreal confusion, cut down by their comrades; those that are not killed, Arjuna picks off. Yet, the darkness persists around the white chariot, for the Trigarta brothers themselves are masters of maya and they are not deluded by the astra.

The heavy darkness afflicts Krishna at the chariot-head. He feels exhausted, so he can hardly hold the reins in his hands. His body is drenched in sweat and blindness films his eyes. In that eerie night, Krishna cries, “Arjuna! Where are you? I cannot see you in this accursed blackness. Are you still alive, Arjuna? Answer me!”

A roar of anger answers the Avatara. Dimly, Krishna hears the kshatriya behind him invoke the vayavyastra, the wind’s weapon. He sees an arrow glowing in the sinister dark, a shaft charged with a thousand storms. Next moment, the golden arrow flashes out in the unnatural night and a hurricane sweeps Kurukshetra. Like the sun, it dissolves the darkness of the Trigarta cloud. It also blows away whole columns of soldiers as if they are dry leaves of summer. The gale of the vayavyastra blows the Trigartas across the plain of war—beautiful they seem, like flights of birds!

His enemy hopelessly scattered for the moment, Arjuna cries to Krishna, “I

fear the Acharya. We must ride back to Yudhishtira.”

Meanwhile, as soon as Drona saw Arjuna ride against Susharma, he makes straight for Yudhishtira. Drona knows the Trigartas will not hold Arjuna for long. Dhrishtadyumna is beside Yudhishtira. The Pandava cries to Drupada’s son, “Here comes Drona, he must not take me.”

The fire-prince laughs. “I am beside you, my lord and my father’s army is here with Satyajit. Drona can promise Duryodhana anything he likes; but he will not keep his word. We will make him pay for it!”

Drona arrives at the outer ring of the warriors who guard Yudhishtira and sees Dhrishtadyumna riding at him. He swerves away from the encounter. Drupada’s army surrounds Drona, shooting at him from every side. Durmukha, the ugly Kaurava, one of Duryodhana’s fiercest brothers, rides at Dhrishtadyumna. Dhrishtadyumna fights him and also shoots smoking shafts at Drona. Durmukha fights as if for his life today and contains Dhrishtadyumna. He looses a renitent astra at Dhrishtadyumna; for a moment, Drupada’s army is dazzled. Seeing his chance, Drona flits through the protective ring.

Drona is dangerously close to Yudhishtira when Satyajit sees him. Stealthy as a lion come to pounce on a calf separated from the herd, the Acharya stalks his royal prey. Satyajit veers his chariot round and attacks Drona. The brahmana, roused, is more than he can contain. In a flash Drona cuts Satyajit’s bow in two and plunges on at Yudhishtira. Drupada’s other brother, Vrika, flies between Drona and the Pandava king. Drona finds Vrika’s heart with a wooden arrow and that kshatriya falls dead from his chariot.

Satyajit seizes up another bow and sets on Drona. Now Satyajit breaks Drona’s bow in his hand and kills the Acharya’s sarathy with a silver shaft that transfixes him to the chariot-head. Drona’s time is short. He pulls a crescent-tipped arrow from his quiver and severs Satyajit’s head from his neck, scarlet spouting at the naked part.

Panic takes the Pandava army. The Kekayas, Virata and some more of Drupada’s brothers rush to where Drona closes ominously on Yudhishtira. Virata’s brother Satanika sets his chariot between Drona and Yudhishtira. Growling, Drona decapitates him, too, in a flash of blood. Drona has killed three kshatriyas in a few moments and the Pandava soldiers shrink from him. He flares on toward Yudhishtira. Shikhandi, Vasudhana and Satyaki challenge the Acharya. He beats them back easily, with fire-headed arrows that kindle their chariots.

Yet, the few moments for which the three held Drona up are fateful. Yudhishtira leaps nimbly from his chariot. He mounts the swiftest horse he can find and flees the battle! When Drona realizes his quarry has escaped, it is too late for him to give chase. He turns on the Pandava army around him and they feel his wrath. Today, Drona fights as if to prove that he is more than Bheeshma's equal. There is a bloodbath again on Kurukshetra, more copious than any before.

Many of Drupada's brothers and Dhrishtadyumna storm back to fight Drona¹. The old master, his white hair flying in the wind of death that blows on that field, is tameless. He kills thousands, their blood falling like rain upon the caked earth. Drona finds the prince Suchitra's heart with a serpentine *naracha*. All around, Pandava soldiers cry, "Kill Drona! Kill Drona or the war is lost!"

Who can kill the Acharya? In a brief hour, alone, he routs all the Pandava army. Away off, Duryodhana stands with Karna at the heart of the Kaurava legions, which have hardly any fighting to do for the slaughter Drona takes to the enemy. His eyes shining, Duryodhana cries to Karna, "Look at him scatter them! Dhrishtadyumna and the rest flee from him. Look at Bheema run!" He roars with laughter. "The Pandavas will forget their dreams of a kingdom, they will hardly hope to live through the day!"

But with the queerest look in his eye, Karna replies, "Don't belittle your enemy too quickly, Duryodhana. These are *kshatriyas*, they will not be beaten so easily. Look where Bheema comes to fight, his eyes red as plums. And look at the rest, streaming back after him. We must ride to the Acharya, he is in danger."

Duryodhana glances sharply at his friend, startled at the warmth in his voice for the Pandavas. Then he sees Drona surrounded and rides to his *Senapati*, with Karna and some of his brothers. A sharp battle breaks out. Nakula and Sahadeva are twin incarnations of death; behind them, Draupadi's sons are implacable; and away to the right, Abhimanyu is the most terrible of all. The Pandavas fight in great heart after Yudhishtira escapes Drona.

Farther away, to the left of Abhimanyu, Bheema, elemental as his airy father, is among Duryodhana's elephants, tormenting them with arrows, smashing them down with his mace, as is commonplace for him by now. Then, to avenge all his kind that Bheema slew, comes a white beast, a titan among elephants: Bhagadatta's Supritika bears down on the son of the wind. Like Indra mounted on Airavata comes that ancient mountain-demon, Narakasura's son; and Airavata's son Supritika charges Bheema's chariot.

The Pandava army parts like the sky for a Deva. Soldiers hapless enough to

come in his way, he tramples as if they were hardly there at all. Enjoying himself among Duryodhana's lesser beasts, Bheema does not see Supritika until the immense creature is upon him. With a shrill scream at the sight of the corpses of the other elephants Bheema has felled, Supritika lifts a gigantic foot and brings it down thunderously on Bheema's chariot. The ratha is smashed. The horses bolt, whinnying. The sarathy Visoka is pulp and Bheema himself nowhere to be seen.

Supritika raises his pale trunk and trumpets his triumph; the sound rings across Kurukshetra. A cry of anguish goes up from the Pandava soldiers, "Supritika has killed Bheema!"

The Pandava, meanwhile, is under the mastodon, dazed but unhurt. Sensing him there, the beast begins to settle on its stomach, to crush him. As its hilly bulk descends on him, Bheema, who knows something about elephants from his boyhood, begins to rub its belly furiously with his hands². Supritika cannot resist this. For a moment, all the rage flies out of him and he basks in the sweet tickling! In a trice, Bheema escapes between his legs and runs for his life.

Hearing the awful cry that Bheema was dead, Yudhishtira flies back into battle with Drupada's army. Like the God of wrath he comes, bow singing. The lord of the Dasaarnas comes with Yudhish-tira, bringing his greathearted elephant, which stood up so bravely to Supritika. But Bhagadatta and his beast are denizens of a lofty realm that borders Devaloka and Yudhishtira's most ferocious volleys fall away from them like raindrops.

Bhagadatta is an endless font of all kinds of missiles, some common, others sorcerous. Columns of men he burns up, in an eyeblink, with blazing javelins that explode with enormous violence. There are hypnotic arrows, full of haunting music, which lulls Yudhishtira's soldiers into dreams. They stand stupefied, forgetting where they are and are easy picking for the Kaurava archers.

Satyaki rides against the lord of Pragjyotishapura. The Yadava covers elephant and rider in a hum of arrows like dark bees. Supritika charges Satyaki's chariot and once more, smashes it in splinters with a stamp. Satyaki leaps out, just in time. But another roar shakes the field and Bheema returns to face the white elephant. He fetches Supritika a staggering blow with his mace. Quick as anything, the creature darts out its trunk, seizes Bheema and lifts him high above its head. The elephant is about to dash Bheema on the ground, when with great presence of mind Bheema stabs its soft trunk with an arrowhead. The animal screams and loosens his grip for an instant, which is time enough for Bheema to wriggle free and leap down.

Supritika lifts a leg, wider than the bole of a tree, to stomp on him. Bheema darts under the creature's belly again and stabs it from below. It runs round and round in a fever, but cannot find its tormentor. Giving up, Supritika sees Abhimanyu's chariot before him and charges it. Bheema leaps out from between its legs, but Abhimanyu is not quick enough to pull his horses out of Supritika's way. The white giant crushes his chariot and the prince himself jumps free at the last moment.

It is an unusual battle being fought on Kurukshetra: the Pandava army against Supritika the elephant! The elephant surely has the better of it. He keeps the enemy army at bay, crushing so many chariots, trampling any men who come in his way, holding up Bheema; while Bhagadatta on his neck sows death all around him in a scarlet flurry.

Panic grips the Pandavas and their soldiers' cries ring plaintively across Kurukshetra.

FIVE

AN ANCIENT AND HIS BEAST

Arjuna's vayavyastra has just swept away the Trigarta army, when he hears the alarm of the Pandava forces being savaged by Bhagadatta and Supritika. Arjuna says, "He was my father Pandu's friend, but he kills thousands of our men. Bhagadatta must die today, if I have to kill him myself."

But as soon as Krishna turns his horses round, Susharma roars at Arjuna again, "Are you afraid to fight that your little wind has died down, Pandava? Why do you run from us at every chance?"

Krishna holds his horses and says, "Enough of these Trigartas. Burn them with the Vajra, there are more important battles to fight elsewhere."

Already, Susharma and his brothers cloak the white chariot again in a bank of arrows. Arjuna invokes the Vajra and shoots a silver shaft charged with that final weapon at the Trigartas. It is an adamantine thunderbolt and gashes across the field in a jagged thousand-jointed streak. Like a small sun, it erupts among the Trigarta legions and nine of every ten men Susharma brought to war are pillars of ash. Susharma himself survives and some of his brothers. That king still calls arrogantly to Arjuna, "Fight me to the end, Pandava. You will not live to see the sun set. Fight me if you dare!"

Arjuna says in amazement, "Susharma isn't dead. You decide, Krishna, shall I fight him or ride against Bhagadatta?"

Without a word, Krishna turns his chariot back to the Trigartas. His ire up, because he can hear the screams of the Pandava army beset by Supritika, Arjuna faces Susharma and his men. Arrows radiate from the Gandiva like rays from a star and he lights up the field with a clutch of astras. The Trigartas have not yet seen such battle from Arjuna: he wilts them. He takes Satyaratha's head off with a crescent-tipped shaft, like the one with which Drona killed Satyajit and attacks Susharma himself with such violence that king faints. The rest of his men, those left alive, take to their heels.

Krishna laughs, "At last you fight as you can. One man has wiped out the dreaded Trigarta legion. Today I am proud of my kshatriya!"

And Arjuna's heart is full with his sarathy's rare praise. They turn back to the main Kaurava army on Kurukshetra. Seeing the gandharva horses, a cheer goes up from the Pandava ranks. Like a bright and dangerous wind comes

Arjuna and Kaurava soldiers run from him for their lives. Their roars turn quickly to cries of fear. Seeing how many of his men had died while he fought the Trigartas, Arjuna blazes on Kurukshetra like Siva's son Karttikeya did when he fought Tarakasura's fell legions!

Krishna steers his chariot to confront Bhagadatta. The Pandava and the Asura fight. The air is an opaqueness of arrows, some plain and sharp, others astras, locking with each other, burning the sky. Bhagadatta prods Supritika with his goad so the elephant rushes at Arjuna's chariot. The Pandava does not have the heart to shoot the magnificent beast, so, at the last moment, Krishna has to veer out of the way and the colossus thunders by, his tread missing the chariot by a hand's width.

Swirling his mount round with astonishing speed, Bhagadatta covers Arjuna with arrows. Arjuna fights back powerfully and Bhagadatta begins to shoot more at Krishna than his warrior. He burns him with flaming shafts, while the dark sarathy bears no arms and can make no reply. Bhagadatta has remembered that Krishna killed his father Narakasura and means to have revenge. In fury, Arjuna cuts the demon's bow in shards. At once, fourteen eerie lances appear one after another in Bhagadatta's hands; he casts them, bands of light, at Krishna. Arjuna smashes them in the air with some ethereal archery.

Arjuna aims at Supritika's armor, cutting it away piece by piece. Bhagadatta casts a livid shakti at Krishna. Arjuna snuffs its fires in flight and the next two missiles. With a roar, Bhagadatta casts another shakti at Arjuna himself, knocking his crown askew. Smiling, the Pandava rights the jeweled kirita with his hand, while the Gandiva still streams arrows, miraculously! Once more, he breaks Bhagadatta's bow.

Maddened that this mere boy shames him yet again, the lord of the mountain chants a deep mantra and hurls the elephant-goad in his hand at his antagonist. The goad turns into an occult ayudha, which lights up earth and sky with towering flames, as it flares at Arjuna. The Pandava shoots ten arrows, quick as thoughts, at the infernal thing. It consumes them easily and flies on at him. A cry goes up from Yudhishtira's men that Arjuna would be killed. At the last instant, Krishna stands up and receives the weapon in his chest!

A flash of light as of a star exploding: then, utter darkness for another moment. When the darkness clears, Krishna stands smiling, unhurt and the vaishnavastra that Bhagadatta cast has turned into a garland of blue lotuses around the Avatara's neck. Rapturous cheering echoes across the Pandava ranks. Bheema hugs Yudhishtira, crying, "They are both alive!"

But Arjuna says, “Krishna, he cast the astra at me; why did you take it upon yourself? You swore to be just my sarathy.”

Krishna smiles, “A sarathy will save his kshatriya’s life, won’t he? Besides, I only took back what was mine.”

“How is that?”

“It was the vaishnavastra he cast at you, which Bhumi Devi begged from Vishnu for her son Nar-akasura. Naraka was invincible for it, until I killed him. Before he died, he gave the astra to his son. It is not only an astra of fire, Arjuna; it protects whoever has it against every other weapon. The vaish-nava was Bhagadatta’s strength and his elephant’s. Now you can kill them.”

Arjuna raises the Gandiva again. He feels a new current of power in his fingers. He looses an orient shaft at the white elephant Supritika. It hums into the beast’s lofty brow, from where Arjuna has shot away the armor. Splitting the creature’s temples as thunder does a mountain, the arrow of golden wings pierces deep into the animal’s brain, like a snake into an anthill and, with a long scream, the pale giant sinks to his knees, already dead. Bhagadatta roars in shock. Another crescent-headed shaft from Arjuna crashes into his chest, cleaving his old heart and the lord of Pragjyotishapura falls from his elephant’s back, dead himself.

Jubilation breaks out among the Pandavas. Both armies stop fighting and gather thickly around the fallen ancient. Arjuna climbs down from his chariot and approaches the dead asura. Folding his hands to one of the last kshatriyas from a bygone age and both his fathers, Pandu and Indra’s, friend besides, Arjuna walks around Bhagadatta in a reverent pradakshina.

SIX

DRONA'S VOW

It is high noon when Bhagadatta dies. Soon, the fighting resumes, fiercer than ever. The Kauravas surge forward to avenge their slain warrior. But now Arjuna leads the Pandava army: resplendent in his chariot, inspired by his triumph over the Trigartas and Bhagadatta. He kills hundreds of enemy soldiers, burns them with many fires. Shakuni's brothers ride to challenge Arjuna. From two sides, they attack him at once. They are gifted archers. But the ambidextrous Arjuna switches the Gandiva from hand to hand and he kills both in a moment, so you cannot tell which one dies first: the one whom he shot through the heart, or the other whose neck he severed.

Roaring shrilly to see his brothers die, Shakuni flies at Arjuna. Serpent's eyes glinting, he raises a soft hand and casts a spell at the Pandava. The earth cracks open; a pride of lions leaps from the fissure and surrounds Arjuna's chariot! But Shakuni's maya has no power over the Gandiva. A gleaming arrow dissolves the beasts and the moment's fright they brought.

Arjuna roars at Shakuni, "This is war, not a game of dice! Come, fight me if you dare."

He covers Shakuni's chariot with flames from the Gandiva. His rage forgotten, Shakuni bolts, the Pandava soldiers laughing at him. Arjuna pulls on his bowstring and Kurukshetra trembles with that sound, even as Lanka did when Rama once pulled on the Kodanda at the gates of that evil city. The Kaurava soldiers run to Drona to save them from the dreadful Pandava.

Bheema, Satyaki, Dhristadyumna, Abhimanyu, Nakula, Sahadeva, Shikhandi and Draupadi's sons are beside Arjuna at the head of the army. Drona rides against his invincible sishya. Dhristadyumna sallies to meet him, unnerving the master. With Arjuna back, Yudhishtira comes to fight again. Some of Dhritarashtra's sons confront him. Seeing his father unsure of himself before Dhristadyumna, as bright as the fire from which he was born, Aswatthama dashes to his side. Drona's son fights like another Arjuna. In fury at all the death inflicted on the Kaurava army today and for the honor of his father who commands Duryodhana's legions, Aswatthama fights like ten kshatriyas.

Neela, prince of Mahishmati, a splendid archer, has killed five hundred Kaurava soldiers. Aswat-thama rounds on him. Valiantly though that prince

fight, he is no match for Drona's son. Aswat-thama cracks his bow and, without waiting for Neela to pick up another weapon, cuts his head off with a scythe-tipped shaft. In rage, the Pandavas surround their guru's son. At once, twenty Kaurava warriors appear at his side and the battle spreads evenly again.

Mace in hand, Bheema leaps out of his chariot and fells anyone foolish enough to stand before him. Drona turns to the son of Vayu and now Karna goes with him. Seeing Karna, Krishna steers Arjuna's chariot straight at him. At once, the fighting stops everywhere; all eyes are on the two sworn enemies. Their rivalry has been a legend for so long. For so long millions of men have waited for the moment when Arjuna and Karna would meet on Kurukshetra.

Karna wastes no time, or paltry weapons; he greets Arjuna with an agneyastra. Quicker than seeing, Arjuna extinguishes the weapon of fire with one of the blue sea, a varunastra like a river from his bow. It is a breathless moment on Kurukshetra, when the two astras meet like a wave and an island of flames and subside against each other. But then, as if the time for these two heroes to fight has not yet come, other warriors join the fray and the battle becomes diffuse again.

Still buoyed by his victories of the morning, Arjuna kills Shatrunjaya, in a carmine flash. Dhrishtadyumna rages as if he is in contention with Arjuna, to see which of them can kill more of the enemy. Now they fight in knots of kshatriyas: Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Arjuna and Abhimanyu against Drona, Karna, Aswatthama and Duryodhana. The sun sinks, at last, on the frenetic spectacle and conches boom to call an end to the twelfth day of the war.

There is no doubt to whom the day belongs. Arjuna has destroyed the Trigarta army and a thousand other Kaurava soldiers; and Drona could not take Yudhishtira. A red-eyed Duryodhana comes to his Acharya, his Senapati. He does not come alone, but with many of his brothers and some of the other kings, his allies.

When he speaks to his master, Duryodhana's voice is soft, but his words are like knives. "Susharma lured Arjuna away from Yudhishtira and he lost most of his army and his brothers. You had all morning to take Yudhishtira, but you did not. Either you are no more the warrior you once were, or your love for the Pandavas prevents you from keeping your oath. I never asked you to do anything special for me; you made the offer. We pinned our hope on you, Acharya. Susharma sacrificed his army and his brothers' lives; but you broke your word."

Bheeshma had grown used to Duryodhana's sharpness. But Drona is not his Pitama. The Acharya rasps, "You know I did everything I could! And I would

have had him, but Yudhishtira fled. Before he returned, Arjuna was back.”

Duryodhana says nothing to this, but his mood does not change. If anything, his silence is more contemptuous than his words were. His face burning, Drona cries, “I swear I will kill one of their best warriors tomorrow. I will kill a maharathika for you. There is a vyuha for such hunting: the chakra. Tomorrow, we will form our legions in the chakra vyuha and snare a great kshatriya. None of the Pandavas, except Arjuna, knows how the chakra vyuha is breached. He must be lured away again and I will kill you an archer who has killed ten thousand of our men!”

A slow smile breaks on Duryodhana’s face. He turns to Susharma, who says, “I will take Arjuna far away and tomorrow he won’t escape us.”

Duryodhana hardly believes this. But he is happy to allow Susharma to sacrifice himself for the life of one of the Pandava maharathikas. One warrior who had killed ten thousand men was worth Susharma’s life and his brothers’. Drona nods curtly, turns on his heel and walks away. Within him, he seethes; he even thinks fleetingly of renouncing his command. But he was not born a kshatriya and being Senapati of the army of Hastinapura is not a charge the ambitious Acharya will easily relinquish. He swallows his pride and promises himself he will prove worthy of his position. Tomorrow, Duryodhana would lavish his praise on him. Drona’s vow is to cost the Pandavas dearly.

SEVEN

THE CHAKRA VYUHA

Dawn of the thirteenth day of the war, the third of Drona's command: the sun rises amidst weird haloes, portending some tragedy. Tall and grim, Drona stalks on to the field, a man who has left conscience behind him. He deploys his legions in the chakra vyuha, phalanx of the spinning wheel. The formation is almost flower-like, with Duryodhana at its heart and around him ring upon ring of kshatriyas. Karna, Dusasana and Kripa are among the inmost layer; in the next, is Jayadratha with his aksauhini. At Jayadratha's side is Aswatthama and Duryodhana's brothers form the next ring of the chakra. Shakuni, Kritavarman, Shalya, Bhoorisravas and their legions are the outer rim of the wheeling flower, with Drona himself beyond the perimeter. On the fateful thirteenth day, all the Kaurava soldiers wear red clothes and garlands of red flowers and from afar, by the light of dawn, it seems that a gigantic carmine lotus has bloomed upon the earth: a blood lotus.

The fighting begins. Today, Bheema leads the Pandava army. He rides out before Satyaki, Dhrish-tadyumna, Drupada, Kuntibhoja, Kshatradharma, Brihadkshatra, Sisupala's son Dhrishtaketu, Sahadeva, Nakula, Ghatotkacha, Yuddhamanyu, Uttamaujas, Shikhandi, Draupadi's sons, Virata, Yudhishtira, the Kekaya brothers and a hundred other kshatriyas. In a throng, they attack the scarlet vyuha. But the brahmana is there at the rim of his formation and he is like a mountain against which the waves of a sea dash in vain. His chestnut horses flit everywhere and his arrows are an impenetrable veil. Behind Drona's veil, the other Kaurava warriors seem to wheel, round and round, never showing a still target. It is a subtle vyuha and its kshatriyas' shafts fly out in hot swarms from where they are least expected.

The chakra vyuha melts the Pandava legions in a sludge of gore and they have no Arjuna with them to cleave the spinning wheel. First thing after the conches blared, Susharma challenged him again with a fresh complement of Samsaptakas: now, mercenaries recruited in the night for fine sums of money. Once more, Arjuna and the Trigartas face each other, far from the rest of the battle.

There is no breaching the chakra vyuha. Not Bheema's elemental strength and the inspired archery of the others, combined, can break a way into the turning maze, which vomits death out of its hermetic confines. Exhilarated, the

Kaurava soldiers fight as never before and hardly a handful lose their lives from stray arrows, from inescapable fate; while thousands of Pandava soldiers perish. Drona's esoteric vyuha is perfectly secure against Yudhishtira's army. It is an almost magical formation and only a maharathika who knows exactly how can penetrate the fluid chakra.

Yudhishtira cries in despair, "Doesn't anyone but Arjuna know how this vyuha can be breached?" Then he remembers; of course, another kshatriya knows the secret of the chakra vyuha: Arjuna himself has taught Abhimanyu.

Yudhishtira turns in excitement to his nephew, "Abhimanyu, only four men know the mystery of the chakra vyuha. Krishna, Pradyumna, Arjuna and you. You are our only hope, child, will you break into the wheel of death?"

Abhimanyu hesitates, a frown on his face. Yudhishtira says, "What is the matter?"

That prince replies, "I can break into the chakra vyuha quite easily. But my father had time only to teach me how to enter the spinning maze; he did not show me how to come out again. I may be trapped inside."

Yudhishtira says quickly, "Once you make the breach, we will all follow you in."

Bheema cries, "I will be at your heels, Abhimanyu and Dhristadyumna, Satyaki, the Kekayas, Panchalas, Prabhadrakas and the Matsyas. Make the first break and we will smash the vyuha."

How Abhimanyu's eyes shine at the privilege. He cries, "I will bring glory to the Houses of Kuru and Vrishni. My father and my mother and my uncles will be proud of Abhimanyu today!"

Yudhishtira embraces the boy of sixteen summers, that great kshatriya. The Pandava says, "May all the Gods bless you! Our best warriors will ride with you, Abhimanyu. Go, my child, bring us glory."

Abhimanyu has no doubt he can break into the chakra vyuha. Only, the wheel is known to snap shut as soon as an enemy enters, as some carnivorous flowers do around a bee. But his uncles have assured him they will not let the vyuha close behind him. They will shatter the wheeling thing, as soon as he breaks in. His kshatriya blood coursing, Abhimanyu climbs into his chariot. With a radiant smile, he salutes his uncles. Yudhishtira orders two fine archers to climb in behind the prince, to watch his back. Then, the other Pandavas and kings all climb into their rathas and follow Arjuna's son.

Abhimanyu says to his sarathy, “Fly at the chakra vyuha!”

The man can hardly believe the command. “My prince, Drona is a wily brahmana. This is a trap laid for you. He knows your father is away against Susharma’s Samsaptakas and I hear he has sworn to kill a maharathika today. Don’t ride into mortal peril, Abhimanyu, I fear for your life.”

Abhimanyu snorts at the man’s fears. “Drona is so smug I look forward to fighting him! Have you forgotten who I am, that you fear for me? I am Arjuna’s son, I am Krishna’s nephew! Not all the Kauravas together can hold me. After today, they will tremble at Abhimanyu’s very name. This is no time for faintheartedness; our men are dying like flies. Why, I would not fear Arjuna, Indra, or Vishnu himself in battle. Ride, sarathy, ride at the chakra vyuha!”

With a sigh and dread in his heart, the charioteer cracks his whip and rides at Drona’s cunning wheel.

EIGHT

JAYADRATHA'S MOMENT

Like a bolt of lightning upon the earth, Abhimanyu's chariot streaks at Drona's vyuha. But for the banner that ratha flew, it could be Arjuna himself flying at the enemy. Abhimanyu knows how to penetrate the vyuha; he knows the soft parts of the outer wheel. Ignoring all the more obvious targets the other Pandavas aimed at, before him, he looses a torrent of fire-shafts to the right and the left of where he rides. He sweeps past Drona with that tirade and the vyuha crumbles at its rim. In the panic that follows, the chakra is breached at exactly the place Abhimanyu rides at, though he hasn't shot a single arrow directly ahead of him. He flits through to the inside of the vyuha and the Kaurava soldiers run from him in terror.

Just behind Abhimanyu ride Bheema, Yudhishtira, Satyaki, Dhristadyumna and the others, straight at the fracture in the vyuha, while Drona rallies his men, quickly. But it isn't the brahmana but another who snaps the vyuha shut in the Pandavas' faces.

Within the chakra vyuha, Abhimanyu hunts like Yama. He is hardly a human prince, anymore, but a young God in his chariot, his bow radiating astras all around him. That boy cuts down a thousand men before the Kaurava warriors recover and attack him in an angry throng. Already, though it isn't noon yet, the field within the chakra has the appearance of Kurukshetra when the sun is setting: littered with corpses, the ground blood-drenched. The common Kaurava soldiers run blindly from Arjuna's son.

Roaring, Duryodhana charges Abhimanyu. In a flash, Drona is at his king's side, knowing how dangerous it is for him to face the youth alone. Duryodhana is at the heart of the lotus and Abhimanyu has broken right through to him in moments. At Drona's anxious call, Aswatthama, Kripa, Kritavarman, Karna and Shakuni rush to protect Duryodhana. They form a ring around Abhimanyu and attack him all at once. But he is indeed Arjuna's son, Krishna's nephew and he is indomitable! Arrows flare from him in every direction, rays of light, banks of death.

Not all those warriors together can contain Abhimanyu. Bhoorisravas, Dusasana and some other sons of Dhritarashtra ride at him. Even as he holds them off, easily, beats them back in a wrath of arrows, he cuts Karna's armor from his chest and strikes him deep with a shaft like a serpent. Karna staggers in

his chariot and his bow falls from his hand. And how proudly the uncle's eyes shine to see his nephew's valor. But he cannot show at all what he feels; not though part of him longs to fly to Abhimanyu and begin fighting at his side!

Arjuna's illustrious son scatters the enemy as a storm of light will some shreds of darkness. Karna and Shalya make a brave stand, but not together can they face his stunning archery. Abhimanyu knocks Karna out of his chariot with a virile gust of arrows. He strikes Shalya unconscious, so that king has to be borne out of battle.

Drona watches the young man approvingly. He says to Kripa beside him, "He excels his father! Look at him, he can burn up all our army if he wants. But it seems he restrains himself, or fate holds him back. Mark my words, he doesn't yet fight as he can."

Duryodhana hears this. His face darkening, he turns to Karna, "Do you hear him? Do you hear the love in his voice? Ah, this Drona can vanquish Indra and Yama if he wishes. But he loves his precious Arjuna, so how will he kill Arjuna's brat? I doubt the young fool could have broken into the chakra vyuha, if the Acharya had not let him. And now, knowing he has Drona's protection, he fights like twenty kshatriyas. It is not that Abhimanyu is exceptional, but that our Senapati will not harm him."

Karna makes no reply, though he longs to tell Duryodhana that there is no archer on Kurukshetra like Abhimanyu. But Dusasana hears his brother and says, "You are right. Drona will not harm Abhimanyu; we must do it ourselves. Watch me kill the whelp, Duryodhana. That will break Arjuna's heart and Krishna's, too. They may even die of grief. This is a fine chance, my brother: we can win the war by just killing this boy!"

With a roar, he flies at Abhimanyu, imagining that he, Dusasana, will be the kshatriya who wins the war. Karna smiles to himself. The battle between the ambitious Dusasana and Abhimanyu lasts only a few moments. Seeing the Kaurava ride at him, Abhimanyu breaks the bow in his hand from an incredible way off, before Dusasana has even raised it. Then, five more searing shafts, quick as one, cut Dusasana down in his chariot and his sarathy rides off the field with his unconscious warrior.

Karna rides at Abhimanyu once more. But his heart is not in this fight and anyway the youth is irresistible. Karna is wounded again and has to flee from his nephew. Abhimanyu fights on, a vyuha by himself. Often, his boyish laughter rings above the roars and screams of his enemies.

Meanwhile, at the rim of the chakra, the other Pandava warriors find themselves held up, extraordinarily. Yudhishtira, Bheema, Shikhandi, Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna, Drupada, Virata, Nakula, Sahadeva, the Kekaya brothers and Dhrishtaketu streamed after Abhimanyu like its tail behind a comet. But only Abhimanyu breaks into Drona's wheel; and, once he does, the vyuha seals itself around him like the arms of death. Bheema and the rest are hardly a chariot's length behind the Arjuna's son, when he makes his rupture and storms in. He turns briefly and smiles beatifically at his uncles. Then, a lone kshatriya looms before the Pandavas, barring their way. To their surprise, they see it is Jayadratha.

At first, Bheema roars with laughter. Just he and Arjuna had routed this villain in the jungle, when he had abducted Draupadi. But there is something Bheema does not know about Jayadratha, nor do any of the others. Yudhishtira and Satyaki are the first to charge him, contemptuously; Jayadratha gives them such a fight! They had expected to sweep past him before the Kaurava chariots rode back to fill the breach Abhimanyu made. Jayadratha holds up not just Yudhishtira and Satyaki, but soon enough, all those matchless kshatriyas. He does not let them advance a foot.

Yudhishtira breaks his bow, but, quick as light, Jayadratha picks up another and fights on. He kills Bheema's horses and plucks his bow right out of the wind-son's hand. Arrows stream from Jayadratha with sureness and swiftness far beyond anything he ever possessed. The dullard fights like Arjuna or Karna today! The Pandavas can hardly believe what they are seeing. With a superlative fusillade, Jay-adratha drives back not merely Bheema, but Dhrishtadyumna, Virata, Drupada, Shikhandi and Yudhishtira. He bars their way with a wall of arrows worthy of Bheeshma himself; and as he holds them up, a hundred Kaurava chariots fly forward to seal the crack in the chakra vyuha.

In moments, the vyuha is as it was before Abhimanyu broke in. Siva's boon to Jayadratha is fulfilled: that if Arjuna and Krishna were not near, one day he would hold up the other four Pandavas by himself. And this was a day of sweet revenge for Jayadratha, for the way they had humiliated him in the forest; though he would not savor that sweetness for long.

Yudhishtira and Bheema fling themselves at the chakra vyuha, but to no avail. The horror of what has happened dawns on them. They remember what Abhimanyu said, 'I can break into the vyuha quite easily. But my father had time only to teach me how to enter the spinning maze; he didn't show me how to break out of it again. I may be trapped inside.'

Yudhishtira is numb with guilt, to remember his thoughtless answer to the boy, 'Once you make the breach, we will all follow you in.'

Bheema shudders to recall his own rash promise, 'I will be at your heels child and Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, the Kekayas, Panchalas, Prabhadrakas and Matsyas will fly in after you. Only make the first break and we will smash the vyuha in moments.'

Bheema stares helplessly at Yudhishtira, who is as stricken as he is.

NINE

ABHIMANYU

Within the chakra vyuha, Abhimanyu is a hungry tiger loose among a wilderness of deer. He kills thousands of men, his face so young and innocent, his archery so mature, so awesome. Like Kart-tikeya among the Asuras, Abhimanyu is at the Kaurava legions: bodies are scattered everywhere, one heaped on the other and blood runs in little streams. Those whom he kills hardly cry out any more. It is as if they expect to die at his hands; indeed, as if they would rather die quickly, than suffer the torment of fear with which he stalks them. Soon, no one can count how many men that handsome prince has killed. He strews the field with corpses and severed limbs, as priests strew blades of kusa grass upon a vedi. He scatters Kurukshetra with noble heads of kings, adorned with crowns, turbans, ear-studs, pearls and diamonds, like lotuses cut from their stalks and flowing blood.

He looses a gandharvastra at the enemy. It is a missile of dreams and suddenly they see a thousand Abhimanyus everywhere, each one shooting at them. The Kaurava soldiers run in every direction. Many of them fall on their own comrades in panic and hack one another down. Abhimanyu's clear laughter crests that wave of death.

Moved by foolhardiness, envy and a hope for quick fame, Shalya's son Rukmartha challenges Abhimanyu. The duel between the two is intense, but brief; and Arjuna's prince severs Rukmartha's young head. Rukmartha's incensed brothers rush at him from four sides. But he strikes them all down, quicker than seeing and they are carried unconscious from the field.

Duryodhana's beautiful son Lakshmana¹ Kumara rides at Abhimanyu from a flank. A wild duel breaks out between the cousins. Fire in his eye, Duryodhana roars encouragement at his boy; and for a while, it seems Abhimanyu is contained. He cannot lacerate the Kaurava legions any more; Lakshmana absorbs him. Duryodhana's son fights like the prince of old, Rama's brother, after whom he is named. But then, Abhimanyu pierces his throat with a perfect arrow. With his father watching in horror, Lakshmana Kumara dies.

Duryodhana's roar echoes on Kurukshetra, as if he himself had been shot. His face a mask, he cries, "Kill the wretched boy, he has killed my son!"

Six maharathikas stream forward against Abhimanyu. Drona, Kripa,

Aswatthama, Karna, Brihad-bala and Kritavarman surround the meridian prince. Meanwhile, Abhimanyu has seen who sealed the chakra vyuha against his uncles. He attacks Jayadratha with a gale of silver shafts. It seems he does not mean just to break the wheel open again, but to destroy it. But Jayadratha bars his way with a legion of elephants and some exceptional archery of his own.

Like thunderclouds around the rising sun, the six maharathikas surround Abhimanyu. But he fights like the sun himself and not the six together can quench him. Like a dancer in his chariot, he infuses a lifetime's heroism into an hour; as if he knows he hasn't a lifetime but just this hour to make his name immortal. Abhimanyu knows the other Pandavas have been kept out of the chakra vyuha, but he fights as if they are all with him, in his very body. The six maharathikas have their horses killed by lightning from the hands of Arjuna's son. They have their bows shredded and their chariots shattered beneath them by impossible volleys.

Wounded and bloody, Karna runs from the fight and Shalya rides up to take his place. Abhimanyu's fiercest assailant is Brihadbala, who fights as if he knows his own final moments on earth are here. The prince shoots the armor off his chest, with inspired precision, then pierces him through his heart and Brihadbala dies. Dusasana's son flies at Arjuna's boy. Abhimanyu cries, "At least you stand and fight! It must be your mother's blood in you, because your father is a coward."

Aswatthama looses a flaming astra at Abhimanyu. It glances harmlessly off his clever mail and, in reply, the prince covers Drona's son in blood. Breathlessly, Shakuni says to Duryodhana, "We must attack him all together."

Karna cries to Drona, "We must kill him, or he will kill us all! Acharya, tell us how this terrible boy can be slain."

Drona says wistfully, "Ah, he is a golden storm, isn't he? Arjuna's son is greater than Arjuna! It is the armor he wears that keeps him safe; and the way his father has taught him to wear it."

Karna cries, "Tell us how to kill him, or the war is lost!"

Slowly, Drona says, "You must kill the two men who guard his rear. Then break his bow and his chariot."

"Easy to say, Acharya, but haven't we tried?"

"Only when you face him. You cannot vanquish this child when you face him, not you, Karna, or anyone. But there is a way, a desperate way. You must ride behind him and sever his bowstring when he isn't watching you."

Karna winces and Drona has turned away before he can answer him. The spirit of war possesses the warrior completely. Karna steals behind Abhimanyu and cuts his bowstring with an exact shaft. That prince spins around in shock, with a roar on his lips, "Coward! Who are you?"

Kripa kills the two guards protecting Abhimanyu's back. Drona kills his horses; Kritavarman shatters his chariot under him. Then, six mighty archers attack him together, as he stands unarmed before them. They are like a pack of wild dogs running down a golden stag. They cover him with arrows. His eyes bloodshot, his body shaking with the ignominy of what they have done, he roars at Drona, "You are my father's guru. They say Drona is a great warrior. This is the deed of a coward!"

He turns on Karna, while they still shoot at him. Abhimanyu sneers, "You are Bhargava's sishya! You dare call yourself my father's equal and my uncle says you are a man of dharma. Is this your dharma? All of you are known as noble men, but I see today how such maharathikas fight. Cowards! How does the earth not open for shame and swallow you?"

He seizes his sword and shield and leaps down from his ruined chariot. Staving off the tide of fire in which they seek to consume him, Abhimanyu runs forward: to kill them all. Drona breaks his sword at the hilt and Karna smashes his shield. Abhimanyu stands bared before his sanguinary enemies and they strike him with a hundred shafts, that crash into him one after the other, drawing maroon geysers.

Blood streaming down his body, Abhimanyu runs back to his chariot and has a thought of his father. 'Arjuna, I will not see the pride in your eyes when you hear what I have done today.'

Then, his own eyes fill with tears; he thinks of Subhadra and knows she will be heartbroken when she hears he is dead. Abhimanyu thinks of Krishna, while they shoot at him at will and his armor still shields him from most of their arrows; of Yudhishtira and Bheema, he thinks. How stricken they would be at what had happened today, how tormented with guilt that they could not come to him when he needed them. But Jayadratha would pay for what he did; he would pay with his life.

Abhimanyu pulls a wheel free from the broken axle of his chariot. By now, he is a setting sun on Kurukshetra, crimsoned by enemies' arrows he wears like a kshatriya's proud ornaments, in profusion. He whirls the chariot-wheel over his head and stands radiant before them, his spirit undimmed by the least tinge of

fear. Abhimanyu cries, “Save your honor, Kshatriyas! Don’t let shame stain your souls. Come and fight me one by one, if you dare!”

Even as Krishna did at Bheeshma, he strides at Drona, wheel in hand. His hair flies in a breeze blowing just around him, his face shines supernaturally. He raises the wheel to cast it at Drona. The Acharya splinters it in his hands with ten wish-like arrows. Abhimanyu seizes up his mace from the ruins of his chariot. He cries through bloody lips, “Come, Kshatriyas, fight me one by one!”

He charges Aswatthama, taking Drona’s son unawares. Though Abhimanyu is gravely wounded, he kills Aswatthama’s horses with blows like falling thunder. Aswatthama’s rear guards leap at him; he crushes their heads like eggshells. Aswatthama flees. Knowing death is near seems only to embolden Arjuna’s son. He smashes chariots and their warriors run from him. An entire legion of elephants he kills, blowing like death’s wind among the grey beasts.

Then, Dusasana’s son leaps down from his own ratha and rushes at Abhimanyu. Abhimanyu’s face lights up when he sees him. He roars gladly, “At last a kshatriya! Come cousin, let us fight: for our elders are all cowards.”

They fight with ringing mace-blows. No Kaurava warrior dares shoot at Abhimanyu, for fear of killing their own prince. But he has lost a lot of blood from the shafts of the six maharathikas. Dusasana’s son and he strike each other a tremendous blow, at once. Both fall together, but Abhimanyu faints. In a moment, he wakes and reaches for his weapon. But Dusasana’s boy has already got up and hefted his mace. Just as Abhimanyu begins to rise, the other youth swings his weapon down squarely on his head, flattening it, so blood and brains spurt out. Blemishless Abhimanyu falls back without a cry, dead at twilight.

Around the golden prince, Arjuna’s sixteen-year-old son, the Kaurava warriors erupt in coarse joy. Their yells echo in heaven: treacherous Drona’s hot shouts of jubilation and terrible Karna’s and Aswatthama’s, Duryodhana’s, Kripa’s and the roars of all the rest, as if they had killed a hundred great warriors.

As the sun sinks sadly over that crime, it seems not just the day but all the age has grown dark at how they killed beautiful Abhimanyu. If any of them feels remorse, none shows it, not even Karna. Instead, their cries of celebration swell in an obscene squall, deafening the elements. The chakra vyuha has served its purpose; Drona has kept his word to his malignant sovereign, even if he has lost his soul by doing so.

Across the field, Yudhishtira and Bheema hear that awful roar and they

know Abhimanyu is dead. Yudhishtira swoons in his chariot. The Pandava soldiers dash from the field in irrational terror. Arjuna has not yet returned from his battle with the Trigartas.

TEN

ARJUNA'S VOW

They have carried him back to the camp, but when he wakes from his faint Yudhishtira sits on the ground, holding his head and sobbing. He wails, "I sent the child to his death. I killed him. He said, 'I can break into the vyuha, but not out of it. I am afraid I may be trapped inside.' And without thinking I replied, 'We will all follow you in. Once you make the breach, we will smash the vyuha.' I sent Abhimanyu to his death. With my child gone, what will I do with a kingdom, or even a throne in heaven? What will I do living?"

Bheema stands there, crying silently, too shocked to speak.

In a while, Yudhishtira says, "Drona and Kripa, Karna and Aswatthama, Duryodhana and Shalya could not contain him. So the cowards killed him with treachery, or my heroic child would have finished them all today!" He turns to the others, "I beg you, one of you kill me before Arjuna comes back and asks, 'Yudhishtira, why did you send my son to his death?' How will I face him? How will I tell him? How will I tell Subhadra and Krishna?"

He faints again. In his swoon, Vyasa comes to his grandson and says to him, "Though he was just a boy, Abhimanyu died like a kshatriya. He has found heaven for himself. All that are born will surely die and you must not let your grief consume you. The war remains to be fought and won and you must keep courage.¹"

Yudhishtira awakes, somewhat consoled. But he thinks, "What will I say to Arjuna?"

Arjuna is turning home from his encounter with the Samsaptakas. After a day's battle, Susharma had been routed, his brothers all killed and most of his army as well. The sun sets and Krishna turns his chariot back from the field. Suddenly, Arjuna touches his sarathy's shoulder and whispers, "Look at the omens, they are all evil. My body trembles, my heart beats wildly and I am full of fear. I hope Yudhishtira is safe."

Krishna replies, "No evil has befallen Yudhishtira; for none can. Put away your fear, Arjuna and rejoice that Susharma has no men left with whom to challenge you. Tomorrow, you can fight beside your brothers again."

As they arrive in the Pandava camp, terrible anxiety rears its head again in Arjuna, like a serpent. Silence rules the camp. Arjuna asks frantically, "What is

this dreadful quiet? No vinas are playing and the men slink away as if they want to avoid me. Where are my brothers? Where are my sons, who come to greet me every evening? Where is Abhimanyu today? He is the first to run up, with his smile and embrace me. Something awful has happened. Krishna, terror grips my soul!”

They climb down from the chariot and come to Yudhishtira’s tent. Walking in, they see all the others sitting there, stricken. Arjuna stares at Yudhishtira. His brother does not raise his face, only wipes the tears that flow incessantly from his eyes. Bheema makes to rise when Arjuna enters. But he falls back with an anguished moan, as if his legs cannot support him, or his tongue utter the words that his lips try to form. Nakula sits very still, gazing at the floor. Sahadeva stares out fixedly through the tent-flap and does not meet his brother’s eye. Draupadi’s sons are there, but they also turn their faces away.

No lamps burn in that tent. Night occupies it entirely, as it does the hearts of those within. Dread grips Arjuna in a vice. He asks, “Where is Abhimanyu? My son is the first to receive me every evening. Why are you all so quiet? Say something!”

Only Yudhishtira’s sobs break the silence. Arjuna dare not think the unthinkable thought that licks at him like a flame. He breathes, “I hear Drona formed the chakra vyuha today. You didn’t send my child into it, did you?”

Only silence answers him. Slowly, he continues, speaking to himself, “None of you knew how to enter the chakra vyuha, only my son. I taught him. But I hadn’t time to show him how to come out of it.” He stops, a horrible certainty dawning on him. He whispers again, “Yudhishtira, did you send Abhimanyu into the chakra vyuha?”

Yudhishtira gets up and puts his arms around Arjuna. “Don’t say another word, just kill me. Then ask the others your questions, of why and how, because I have no answers to them. Kill me, my brother, I killed your son.” Yudhishtira is beside himself. “You must avenge your son’s death now, you must kill me! Kill me Arjuna, kill me! I killed Abhimanyu, I swear it is true, I killed your son!”

Arjuna falls as if he has been cut down with a sword. Even Krishna sits abruptly on the floor, his eyes filling. Then he sees Bheema beside him, devastated. He takes Bheema’s hand in compassion and the son of the wind falls sobbing into his arms. Yudhishtira stands turned to stone.

Arjuna wakes with scented water sprinkled on his face. He sits up and cries, “How did it happen? Tell me everything! How could he die? Couldn’t all the

Pandavas and Panchalas together protect him? He knew he could not come out of the chakra vyuha. He must have told you that I had only taught him how to break in. He knew he would die if he was caught inside the wheel of death. He knew it is a trap. Ah, my son!" He faints again.

Then, waking once more, "Oh, Abhimanyu, you were the flower of chivalry. You would never begin a duel, even against your worst enemy. You always waited for the first arrow to be shot at you. How could the Gods allow this? How will Arjuna live when Abhimanyu is dead? Who had the heart to kill my beautiful boy?"

And he is wracked with sobs. Abruptly, he turns on Yudhishtira, "How could you let him go alone into the chakra vyuha? You were there, Yudhishtira. Bheema and Sahadeva, Nakula, Dhrishtadyumna and Satyaki were there. How did you let him go in alone, when you knew he could not come out? How did you, Yudhishtira? Answer me!"

There is no answer. Arjuna cries again, "But who actually killed Abhimanyu? There is no one in the Kaurava army that could match my child. He was a greater kshatriya than them all. Tell me, who killed my prince? Surely, there was some treachery! Ah, my son, they must have surrounded you and shot you down like a dog. I see your sweet face all bloody, as you lie on Kurukshetra as meat for jackals and vultures. How will I face your mothers? How will I break this news to Subhadra and Draupadi? How will I face his wife, the child Uttara?"

He staggers to his feet, flings his quiver and bow from him. He cannot bear the violence of this sorrow and faints again. Once more, they revive him with scented water and salts. Now, Krishna takes Arjuna's hand and speaks to him gently, "You mustn't grieve like this. Your son died a hero's death. He gave his life that many others may live and in peace. In his sixteen years, Abhimanyu achieved what the greatest kshatriyas hardly do in a lifetime. Those whom the Gods love very much, they call back quickly to themselves. Abhimanyu is in Devaloka now, with his grandfather Indra. But your brothers are here around you, Arjuna. Look at them. Are you blind that you don't see the guilt that savages them? Are you made of stone that you cannot see how they suffer? Instead, you indulge your own sorrow and make their burden insupportable. Abhimanyu was not only your son. He was the child of us all and we hardly loved him less than you did."

With a moan, Arjuna runs to embrace Bheema, who breaks down completely, like a child himself. Arjuna falls at Yudhishtira's feet, crying,

“Forgive me! Oh, forgive the harsh things I said to you! I beg you, forgive me, my brothers.”

Yudhishtira embraces Arjuna and their tears flow together. Nakula and Sahadeva come forward to clasp their brother, then, Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi and Satyaki, all crying as if each one had lost his own son.

In a while, Arjuna says, “Tell me now, what happened? I am calm enough to hear everything. Satyaki, tell me. Dhrishtadyumna, my friend, tell me the name of the man who killed my child. Yudhishtira, my brother, tell me.”

A storm of tears takes him again and he says, “My heart is made of stone, that it doesn’t break in a thousand pieces when my child is dead! I am a devil that I still live, when my Abhimanyu is gone.”

Yudhishtira takes Arjuna’s hand and makes him sit beside him. “I will tell you, Arjuna. I will tell you everything that led to the death of the jewel of our line. Early in the day, Susharma lured you away from the main battle and the Acharya formed his chakra vyuha. The fighting began and we could not stand against them at all. The chakra wheeled round and from every part of it, arrows flew out at our men. We tried to break the vyuha, all of us together, Bheema and I, Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna, Sahadeva and Nakula. But Drona stood at its rim and held us off.

Our legions were being shredded. If the chakra was not breached the war would end by evening and all our men would be dead. Arjuna, thousands of our soldiers died each moment and we were not able to kill more than a handful of theirs. In despair I called Abhimanyu and said to him, ‘Among us only you know how to breach the chakra. We must break in, Abhimanyu, or the war is lost.’

He said, ‘My father taught me how to break into the chakra vyuha, but I don’t know how to come out again.

Yudhishtira cannot go on and, in a whisper, Bheema takes up the story. “He did tell us he could not come out of the vyuha once he had broken in. But we said to him, ‘We will be at your heels, Abhimanyu. Just make the first break and we will smash the vyuha.’

All of us stood before him, Yudhishtira and I, Nakula and Sahadeva, Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi, Satyaki, Drupada, Virata, the Kekayas, his brothers and many more. How could he doubt what we said, or refuse to do as we asked, when our men were dying like flies? I will never forget the light that was upon him. Joyfully, he said he would make the breach. He climbed into his chariot and rode at the vyuha. He fought like a Deva; no, he fought more magnificently than

any Deva: he fought like Abhimanyu! And the vyuha parted for him like a woman, while Drona stood helpless.” Tears fill Bheema’s eyes again and he says hoarsely, “How will I ever forget how I saw him last? Just as he was storming into the chakra, he turned in his chariot and gave us all such a smile. Arjuna, that smile will haunt me for the rest of my wretched life!”

Bheema breaks down again and Arjuna takes his brother in his arms and comforts him. Yudhishtira takes up the tale. “We were no more than half a chariot length behind him, so he had room to maneuver. All of us were ready to fly into the vyuha after him. We saw him split the chakra, we saw him flash past the Acharya. We saw him turn and smile and, Arjuna, after he had entered, the chakra was still open! There was a gap in it wide as two chariots. We rode at the opening, Bheema in front, I just behind him and then the others. But suddenly, Jayadratha loomed in our path.”

“Jayadratha? And how many with him?”

Yudhishtira bends his head. He says in a whisper, “Only he.”

“Jayadratha held you all up, alone?”

“He fought like a hundred Jayadrathas.”

Arjuna looks around in disbelief. Bheema and the others nod their heads. Krishna says quietly, “He worshipped Siva for a boon and this was it: that, one day, he would hold up all the Pandavas by himself, as long as Arjuna was not with them. That was his revenge for what you did to him in the forest.”

Yudhishtira resumes, “Jayadratha held us up, as if Siva himself fought from his body. And before we knew it, a thousand men had filled the gap in the chakra vyuha. The vyuha was sealed again, but now with our child inside. For hours, we heard the screams within, as he burned them. They could not hold him at all; he killed ten thousand men. He did not die alone, he killed Duryodhana’s boy Lakshmana.”

Arjuna gasps. Sahadeva says, “He killed Brihadbala.”

Yudhishtira says, “He fought them long, like a tiger a pack of dogs.” He chokes again, “But in the end, they killed him.”

Arjuna cries, “But how did they kill my son? Who killed him?”

Sahadeva comes near and takes his hand. Quietly he says, “My brother, listen to the vilest crime committed on Kurukshetra. Six maharathikas surrounded him: Karna, Kripa, Drona, Aswatthama, Kritavarman and Dusasana’s son. He fought like a God and routed them all. Then, I heard Karna

went to Acharya Drona and asked him how Abhimanyu could be killed; or the war would be lost by dusk, because our child would have razed their army. Drona told Karna that as long as he had his bow in his hand, Abhimanyu's armor was impenetrable. Our precious Acharya told Karna that the only way to kill our prince was to break his bow from behind, like a thief.

Twice Abhimanyu had beaten Karna off, wounding him sorely. So now the dastard crept behind our child, severed his bowstring and then broke his bow. The six surrounded him again. Drona killed his horses, Kripa his guards and his sarathy. And when he was defenseless, they shot him with a hundred arrows, until he was bathed in blood. He fought on and we watched some of it and heard the rest. We were helpless, because we still could not break into the chakra vyuha.

He killed a legion of elephants, though by now he was gravely wounded. When he staggered on his feet, Dusasana's boy leapt down from his chariot and they fought with maces. They struck each other down. Our child was exhausted and Dusasana's boy rose before he did. He struck Abhimanyu a last blow on his head and your son died. There was no shame in his death, Arjuna, except for those who killed him." He hangs his head, "And for all of us who sent him to his death." Sahadeva, also, breaks down and cries.

They watch Arjuna's eyes turn red. He rises softly and stands before them trembling. In terrible quiet, he says, "I swear I will kill Jayadratha tomorrow. Let the Kauravas guard him with every man they have, let Siva himself come to protect him; Jayadratha will not live. If I don't kill him tomorrow, let all the punya I have leak away from me and let me find the worst hell of all for myself. I swear by this sacred agni and by this Gandiva, that if I don't kill Jayadratha tomorrow, I will make a pyre for myself and walk into it with my bow in my hand."

Arjuna picks up the Gandiva and pulls on its string, so the night resounds with that noise. Krishna raises the Panchajanya to his lips and blows a blast on it like the thunder of the pralaya. Even the Devas in their loka hear that sound; and with it, hope courses again through the Pandava camp. Arjuna has mastered his grief and turned it to wrath. There would be a great hunt tomorrow.

Bheema jumps up and hugs Arjuna. "I am so proud of you! I know you will keep your oath. They must have heard this sound across the field and they may have died of fright!"

Grief turns to a searing hunger for revenge. The Pandavas leave for their own tents, to try to sleep what remains of the night. When they are alone,

though, Abhimanyu's bright face comes to haunt them: how he turned and smiled at them just before he broke into the chakra vyuha.

Hardly a man, common soldier or kshatriya, sleeps, for sorrow that Abhimanyu, splendid prince, is dead. And a new anxiety tugs at their hearts in the small hours: for Arjuna's hot oath; it would not be easy to kill Jayadratha. Kaurava spies would already have carried word back to Duryodhana and every man of the Kaurava army would be detailed to guard Jayadratha tomorrow. For if Arjuna did not kill him before the sun set, the Pandava must immolate himself to honor his solemn word. What easier way could there be of killing the invincible Arjuna, than keeping Jayadratha alive until the sun set?

A million men, lying sleepless in their beds, mourning in the night for dead Abhimanyu, pray fervently that the Gods would deliver Jayadratha into Arjuna's hands tomorrow.

ELEVEN

JAYADRATHA'S TERROR

The evening Abhimanyu died, there is jubilation in the Kaurava camp. Drona is lionized: he had kept his word and one of the most feared Pandava warriors was dead. Moreover, this death, more than any other, would shatter the enemy's morale. It would break Arjuna's heart and his brothers' hearts. There is even speculation whether Arjuna will kill himself when he hears the news.

Duryodhana learns of the massacre of the Samsaptakas. He thinks it a fair price to pay for Abhimanyu's death. Why, the Kaurava hardly mourns his own son, Lakshmana, whom Abhimanyu killed. He is so excited that Arjuna's boy is dead. The war possesses Duryodhana absolutely; everything else, even his son's life is insignificant when seen in the light of victory. No price is too high to pay, no sacrifice too dear to make. He celebrates with the others, his pale eyes gleaming brightest of all.

Suddenly, the night's silence is riven with the thunder of the Gandiva, followed by the awesome bass of the Panchajanya. In Duryodhana's tent, they all fall silent. This is not what they had expected, this triumphant pulling at bowstring and blasting on conch. It unnerves them.

But Duryodhana cries, "Hollow sounds! They don't deceive me. Their spirits are broken and they will die soon."

The drinking and celebration continue, if less raucously than before, until Jayadratha bursts in on them, shaking. Karna cries, "What news, O Kshatriya?"

Jayadratha is in such a state he can hardly speak. Somehow, he manages to blurt, "Our spies say Arjuna has sworn to kill me before the sun sets tomorrow! I want to go back to my father's kingdom. It is against kshatriya dharma to pursue someone who has fled the field. Arjuna is a man of dharma. He won't come after me."

Jayadratha has served his purpose already; the shrewd Duryodhana expects no further valor from him. The Kaurava gives a short, cruel laugh. "You are trembling like a woman, Jayadratha. Don't be afraid: a man may swear any oath he likes in a fit of grief, but how will Arjuna kill you? Besides, we hardly killed Abhimanyu with dharma. I think you will be safer with our army than riding home alone. Besides, did you mark what the spies reported? Arjuna said, 'Even if he hides with Siva himself, I will kill him!'"

Jayadratha shakes like a leaf. Duryodhana continues, “The safest place on earth for you is at the heart of my army. All of us will protect you. Even Indra will not be able to touch you, as long as you are with us. I shall be at your side, Jayadratha and Karna, Vivimsati, Sala, Shalya, Chitrasena, Bhoorisravas, Vrishasena, Purumitra, Kripa, Bhoja, Vikarna, Durmukha, Dusasana, Vinda, Anuvinda, Aswatthama, Shakuni, Alambusa. To name only some of those whose sole task tomorrow will be to guard your life. Why, our every soldier will have my command just to protect you.

By yourself today you kept Bheema, Yudhishtira, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Nakula, Sahadeva and all the rest from breaking into the chakra vyuha. And now you fear just Arjuna? He is only another man, like the rest of us. He is no Deva that you should be so terrified of him. I give you my word and I would stake my own life on it: he will not harm a hair of your head!”

Softly, Duryodhana goes on, “Then there is Arjuna’s vow. Jayadratha, you will kill Arjuna: not by cutting him down in battle, but by staying alive until the sun sets tomorrow. Didn’t the spies tell you he has sworn to kill himself, if he has not killed you by sunset? I swear you will not die, but he!”

He is full of dark excitement. “Everything is turning our way once more. Abhimanyu’s death has achieved what we wanted: Arjuna has sworn a rash oath he cannot keep. And when he burns himself after he fails to kill you, what will the other Pandavas do? The rest will be easy to finish. Jayadratha, you have been chosen to be the pretext of our victory!”

Far from reassured, Jayadratha says, “Can all of us together stop Arjuna from keeping his oath? Duryodhana, we killed his son and fear grips me like a pisacha!”

Duryodhana sighs, “If you won’t take my word, let us go to the Acharya and see what he says.”

In Drona’s tent, Jayadratha asks the master, “Acharya, tell me, am I the better archer or is Arjuna?”

Drona says slowly, “You are both great bowmen and you have the same guru. But Arjuna is more dedicated than you; not a day passes when he does not practise with his bow for hours. For him archery is worship. He also has the devastras and he is more resilient than you are.

But all that does not matter: I will save you from Arjuna tomorrow. I will form a vyuha whose mystery he will never penetrate. We will set you at the heart of it and, guarded by us all, you will be safe.”

Jayadratha is still unconvinced, anxiety plain on his face. As if this doubt is a slight to him, Drona says impatiently, “I will do everything I can to protect you. But if it is fated that Arjuna kills you, what shame is there in dying in battle? How splendidly young Abhimanyu met his death today. All that are born must die; and what finer death is there for a kshatriya than to die fighting a war like this one? If Arjuna kills you, Jayadratha, you will find heaven for yourself!”

Jayadratha trembles more than ever. With a sigh, Drona says, “Listen to me. We must save your life tomorrow, not only for your sake but for the very war. I mean to form not one, or two, but three vyuhas and to hide you at the heart of them. On the outside, we shall have a shakata vyuha, within that a chakra and finally a suchimukha vyuha, with you at the needle’s eye, watched over by a column of maharathikas. I will stand over all three vyuhas and anyone who enters them will first have to pass me.

Arjuna has delivered his life into our hands. Even if he breaks past the shakata and chakra vyuhas, it will take him all day. Then, the third and most difficult vyuha will confront him; and I will be at its point again. The sun will have set long before he can reach you.”

Jayadratha seems consoled. Duryodhana moistens his lips in anticipation of Arjuna’s death.

Later that night, across Kurukshetra, Krishna comes alone to Arjuna’s tent. Arjuna lies stiff as an arrow in his bed, his eyes streaming for his son, but his face set like stone. He must keep his vow. First, Jayadratha would die tomorrow. But the others wouldn’t escape, the six cowards who had hunted his child down like an animal.

Krishna glides in and sits beside Arjuna. He says, “That was a rash oath you swore. Where was the need to say you would take your own life if you don’t kill Jayadratha tomorrow? Duryodhana knows about your oath and Drona means to hide Jayadratha at the heart of three vyuhas, with every soldier of his army charged to protect one man’s life.”

Arjuna lies in the darkness, silent. Krishna continues, “A shakata vyuha, first, with Drona at its threshold, then a chakra and finally, a vyuha to confound even you: a suchimukha, with Jayadratha at its eye. And the body of the needle will have their finest warriors, one after the other, Karna, Aswat-thama, Bhoorisravas, Vrishasena, Durjaya, Duryodhana, Shalya, Kripa, Durmukha and Drona, again, following you in. Can you break past all these in time to kill Jayadratha before the sun sets?”

Arjuna is perfectly calm. He says with unusual certainty, "All these men together are not half the archer I am. Drona and his son will not stand before me tomorrow; nor will Karna or any of the others. Jayadratha will die before the sun sets. How will he not die, when my child Abhimanyu will be watching to see if I keep my oath?"

Why are you of all people so full of doubt, Krishna, when we shall be irresistible tomorrow? Think of it like this: we have the noblest weapon with us, the Gandiva. Some say Arjuna is the best archer in the world and the greatest man who ever lived is my sarathy. When you are with me, Lord, how will I fail?"

Arjuna cannot be certain if Krishna smiles in the night. They sit together without speaking for a time and Abhimanyu fills their thoughts. Arjuna says, "I cannot face Subhadra tonight. I can't bear to see her cry. I haven't the strength to console Uttaraa. I beg you, go and comfort them for me. Tell them I will see them tomorrow, when I have kept my oath."

Krishna goes to his sister's tent. He finds her crying as mothers have since the dawn of time, whenever they lost a son to a bestial war. She sits on the floor, her hair loose, convulsed with sobs. The princess Uttaraa sits beside her, pale, numb, tears flowing down her shocked face. Subhadra rises when Krishna comes in. With a wail she runs into his arms and breaks down utterly. Tears springing in his own eyes, Krishna holds her, while she weeps in tides of grief.

Gradually, Subhadra calms down and they sit beside each other again; she never lets go of his hand. Long they sit, in silence. He wipes her tears with dark fingers and says gently, "You mustn't grieve like this. Abhimanyu has reached Devaloka; he is part of the Moon. He is blessed, he is blissful and he died as only the very greatest kshatriyas do. His name is already a legend. Men will always say he was the most perfect prince that ever lived. You must not grieve like this for a warrior who lived as full a life as he did and died a death for which other men would vie.

Subhadra, you are a daughter of the House of Vrishni. You are the wife of the greatest archer in the world. Your brothers are kshatriyas, your son was a great kshatriya. You must not cry. We are in the midst of a war, for which your child gave his life. This is no time for weakness."

Subhadra says, "How can I not cry, Krishna? I think of my boy, whom I carried as a golden baby in my arms, whom I nursed at my breast. I think of him lying on Kurukshetra, his body torn and bloody, his head crushed: and how can I not cry? The five Pandavas are alive, peerless Arjuna and Krishna are alive. Yet,

my child lies dead, with kites and hyenas picking his bones. Oh, how could this happen, Krishna? I thought the sons of Pandu are the mightiest kshatriyas on earth, but I see I was wrong. Otherwise, with his uncles beside him, how was my son killed? He was just sixteen and you tell me that I should not cry because he died a kshatriya's death? What do I care about that? To me, my child is dead and that is all!"

Sobs wrack her again. Krishna holds her close. When her storm abates, he says, "This is your sorrow speaking, Subhadra. Abhimanyu was killed treacherously by the evil ones we fight. Arjuna and I were lured away from the main battle; then the murderers enticed our child into the chakra vyuha and killed him. They broke his bow from behind, because not all of them together could stand against your son in battle.

Adharma has been born into the world and the kali yuga rises over the earth. But the murderers will not escape punishment. Already, Arjuna has sworn to kill the man who sealed the chakra vyuha after Abhimanyu broke into it. Before the sun sets tomorrow, Jayadratha will die; and that will be just the beginning of our revenge. The cowards will all die and their deaths will not be so noble as your child's. Think that Abhimanyu is now one of the Gods and he covered himself in glory before he died.

Subhadra, how is it you cry so bitterly only when your own boy is dead? Do you know how many thousands of mothers have lost their sons to this war? Their tears flow in a river that fills the night. It is a river that sprang in this world long ago, when the very first war was fought; and the river of grief will flow on until the world ends. Dry your tears, Subhadra and console this child Uttaraa. She needs your strength now and instead you show her your weakness."

Draupadi comes in and she is hardly less broken than Subhadra. But she is brave and far stronger for what she has endured these thirteen years. Subhadra and Uttaraa turn to her, almost as to a mother and Panchali comforts them as only another woman can. Krishna returns to Arjuna's tent.

His warrior is waiting for him, now ready with his offerings. This is a nightly ritual and Krishna sits quietly before the Pandava, who worships him with flowers, fruit, incense and honey. The Avat-ara places a hand on Arjuna's head, blessing him. He says, "Jaya vijayi bhava." May you always be victorious. "You must sleep now, Arjuna. You must be fresh and rested tomorrow."

Turning down the lamp, Krishna goes out into the night, where his sarathy, the faithful Daruka, waits with his chariot to take him to his own tent. Krishna climbs in. They drive back slowly, with a breeze full of prophecies caressing

their faces.

TWELVE

ARJUNA'S DREAM

Past midnight, Krishna lies awake in his bed. He gets up and sends for Daruka. He makes the sarathy sit beside him. Krishna takes Daruka's hand and says, "You have heard about Arjuna's impetuous oath. So has Duryodhana and he plans to guard Jayadratha like his own life. Drona will form three vyuhas and keep Jayadratha at the eye of the third, protected by their maharathikas. If Arjuna doesn't kill Jayadratha before the sun sets tomorrow, he must take his own life."

Daruka sits listening. Krishna goes on, "I know what a kshatriya Arjuna is. But it will be harder to pass Drona and the others tomorrow than it was to kill the Nivatakavachas. Then, it is dakshinayana and the sun will set early. I am afraid for Arjuna. There are sinister powers, greater than we know, which watch over Duryodhana's destiny. They will bend their will to keep Jayadratha safe and have Arjuna's life cheaply."

The sarathy has never seen his master's black eyes so anxious. "Daruka, you know how much I love Arjuna. Why, I love him more than I do anyone in the world, more than my queens or my sons. He is part of me as no one else is. If Arjuna were to die tomorrow, I would follow him into the fire."

A flicker of alarm in Daruka's eyes; he has not heard Krishna speak like this before. He remembers something he had heard from the lips of mystic rishis and wise old men: Arjuna and Krishna were born on the same day; they are Nara Narayana. The Dark One lowers his voice, "And if we both die, Daruka, how will the others resist the evil that wants to sweep everything before it? I have sworn I will not fight in this war. But I will perjure myself and break my vow so Arjuna may keep his."

He glances around, for the night has ears. Drawing the sarathy nearer, Krishna whispers, "You must do something for me, old friend. Prepare my own chariot tonight for war. Arm it with all my weapons; put the Saringa in it and my quiver, the Kaumodaki and my Shakti. Tie on the Garuda banner, but don't unfurl it yet. Cover Valahaka, Saibya, Meghapushpa and Sugriva in their armor and yoke them. You also don mail and wait at the edge of the field."

If you hear me blow a rishabha on the Panchajanya, fly to me, Daruka. I will kill Karna, Duryodhana and the rest. I will loose the Sudarashana at them

and we will see how their fine vyuhas stand before my Chakra. Be ready from dawn, Daruka, listen for the rishabha on my conch.”

Daruka says, “I will do as you say, my Lord. But when you are his sarathy, how will Arjuna not keep his vow? How will Jayadratha not die before the sun sets tomorrow?”

Krishna smiles, “It will do no harm to be prepared.”

“Your chariot and weapons will be ready. So shall I.”

The sarathy bows and leaves. With a sigh, and somewhat relieved, Krishna lies down on his bed; with a prayer for Abhimanyu, he falls asleep. In another tent, Arjuna also lies in his bed and he is full of disquiet. But he is tired after the harrowing day and drifts off into a troubled slumber.

Arjuna dreams and Krishna appears in his dream. The Dark One says to him, ‘You must not grieve like this; you will only strengthen your enemies. Anxiety is a sickness, Arjuna; it saps you. I am with you, my friend, fear nothing.’

Arjuna answers him, ‘Will I be able to kill Jayadratha before the sun sets tomorrow? If I cannot, the world will mock me and I must take my own life.’

Krishna grows thoughtful. ‘Do you remember Indrakila, O Pandava? You sat on that mountain in tapasya to have a weapon from Mahadeva. Do you remember how Siva came to you as a vetala? You fought the Lord, Arjuna and he was so pleased with your warrior’s worship he gave you his Paasu-patastra. You must use the Paasupata against Jayadratha and he will not live.’

‘But where is that astra, Krishna?’

‘Come, sit with me in dhyana,’ says Krishna.

In the dream, Arjuna purifies himself; touching holy water, he sits before the Avatara. He shuts his eyes and feels Krishna’s grace upon him. Krishna says, ‘Meditate on the Lord Siva.’

In dhyana, Arjuna feels himself leave his body. Krishna is beside him and holds the Pandava’s hand. Together they fly through a cerulean sky, swift and straight as two arrows. They fly north, cleaving the wind. It is a lucid dream and Arjuna sees everything that lies below him. Across the Himalaya, range of a hundred peaks, they flit and still they flash on, always north. They pass Himavan and fly over a vast tableland, dotted with crystal lakes. On they fly, until they see the most pristine lake of all: the Manasarovara.

Beyond the lambent waters of the Manasa, a lone mountain looms, its peak rounded like a full moon, or a gigantic pearl. This is Kailasa, most sacred of mountains, anointed with opalescent snow. Krishna and Arjuna fly closer to the mountain like a vision. Suddenly, its higher slopes turn blinding, as if a hundred suns have risen upon it. Siva sits on a white ridge, ineffable Uma at his side and they swathe Kailasa with their light.

Krishna and Arjuna fly down to Siva's feet. They prostrate themselves before the God of Gods. They eulogize him with the Satarudriya, his thousand names. Siva smiles. Laying his hand on their heads, he blesses them. He says in his voice deeper than the sky, 'Tell me what boon you have come for, Nara Narayana.'

Arjuna says, 'Lord, I have come for the Paasupatastra.'

Even as he speaks, Arjuna is startled to see the offerings he made earlier that night to Krishna laid at Siva's feet! Serene Mahadeva says, 'My bow and the astra I once loosed at the Tripura lie below the lake of amrita. Seek them out, Arjuna and bring them to me.'

Krishna and Arjuna find themselves flying north again, now with a host of Sivaganas around them. The ganas bring them to the banks of a velvet lake, like a sea before them. They stand on its shore, the dark waters glimmering as far as their eyes see and a spray of nectar flying in their faces. Suddenly, a sibilant hissing fills that place and, with a powerful swirling, the waters part. Two immense serpents, scintillating jewels in their hoods, raise themselves high into the air before Krishna and Arjuna. They are thousand-headed snakes and flames spew from their jaws. Krishna begins to worship Siva aloud with the Maharudriya; Arjuna quickly does the same. At once, the fiery nagas grow quiescent. As the chanting continues, they are transformed into two shining weapons: a golden bow and a silver arrow float out to the two warriors. Kneeling on sands like petal dust, Krishna and Arjuna receive those ayudhas.

With that bow and arrow, Arjuna and Krishna and the Sivaganas with them, fly back to Kailasa. They come to Siva again and offer the weapons to him. He smiles at them and an unearthly light issues from his body. From it, a wild brahmachari stands forth, his eyes fire, his hair falling to his waist in a shimmering blue and black cascade. Bowing to Siva, the apparition picks up the ancient weapons. He shows Arjuna the only way that bow, older than the world, can be strung. He shows him how the arrow is fitted to it and the string is drawn back. Arjuna masters the art of it instantly, as no other archer could.

As he pulls back the bowstring, Arjuna hears Siva's voice, deep in his mind,

intoning the mantra for the Paasupatastra, which begins by invoking Ganapathy, the Lord's elephant-headed son, master of his host of ganas. The mantra fills every cell in Arjuna's body. In a moment, he knows it perfectly. Now, the brahmachari takes those weapons back from the Pandava and, with a cry, from where he stands he casts them back into the distant lake. Becoming fierce serpents again, they submerge below dark ripples and are gone. But Arjuna feels the lake and the weapons within himself still; and he knows the astra will return to him, whenever he needs it.

The brahmachari vanishes. Krishna and Arjuna prostrate themselves once more at holy Siva's feet. As he blesses them, Arjuna sees him again as he did in the forest near Indrakila: as the vetala! All his anxiety swept from him in a wave of joy, Arjuna touches the Lord's feet and flies back to Kurukshetra with Krishna beside him.

Arjuna emerges from dhyana, but Krishna has vanished from his dream. Other dreams flow into the Pandava's sleep and bear him away on tranquil currents.

THIRTEEN

THE THREE VYUHAS

Dawn is yet to break over Kurukshetra and Yudhishtira is the first one up to greet the fourteenth day of war. As always, he begins his morning with worship. When he has finished, the sun appears on the rim of the world and the birds in the trees around the battlefield hymn the brilliant Deva. As Yudhishtira rises from his prayers, Krishna walks into his tent.

“Did you sleep well, my Lord?”

Krishna smiles, “I did. And now, seeing your serene face, I know that no harm can befall me!”

With Krishna, come Bheema, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Shikhandi, Sahadeva, Nakula, Draupadi’s sons, Chekitana, Dhrishtaketu, the five Kekaya brothers wearing red mail and looking like indragopaka insects, Yuyutsu, Ghatotkacha, Drupada and Virata. One by one, Yudhishtira embraces them all. Those lords of the earth, the soldiers of dharma, are solemn on this momentous fourteenth morning of the war.

Yudhishtira turns again to Krishna. “My Lord, we rely on you to see us through this war, to bring us victory. More than any other day, we depend on your grace today.” He takes the Dark One’s hand, “Arjuna must keep his vow, Krishna. With you as his sarathy, he cannot fail.”

Krishna is full of light, full of faith. He says, “There is no kshatriya in all the world like your brother. When Jayadratha dies, the Kauravas will know that Arjuna’s vows are made not just of words, but arrows. Have you seen the omens of the earth and the sky, of the water, the wind and the birds? They all cry out that you will prevail today and that the Kauravas are doomed. Yudhishtira, I am here with you, I swear Arjuna will keep his oath.”

Arjuna walks in and he seems entirely calm. He touches Yudhishtira’s feet and those of the others older than him. Yudhishtira embraces his brother. “Your face is as bright as Krishna’s, as if the two of you have some secret you are keeping from us. I am content, Arjuna: seeing you like this, I have no doubt that Jayadratha will die before the sun sets. But if there is some good news you have, won’t you share it with us?”

Arjuna recounts last night’s dream, still vivid in his mind. He says, “Siva’s own astra is mine to summon. Jayadratha will not see the sun set today.”

Word goes out about Arjuna's dream and soon the Pandava camp echoes with the news. Conches and trumpets blare and excited soldiers make for the battlefield, eager for the fighting to begin. No one doubts, any more, that Arjuna will keep his oath. Who will stop him, when Siva himself has blessed the Pandava?

Krishna climbs into Satyaki's chariot to leave Yudhishtira's tent; for, they have both come as Yada-vas to the early council. But when they arrive at the stables where the horses are stalled, Krishna is a sarathy again for the day's battle. The Avatara goes into the enclosure like any charioteer; with his own hands, he rubs down Arjuna's gandharva horses. He washes them lovingly, then drapes mail over their smooth bodies, while they stand for him in delight, nuzzling their faces against him.

Fortunate indeed is the Pandava who has Vishnu's Avatara for his sarathy! Krishna places his warrior's weapons in the chariot, where Arjuna can reach them easily. Finally, he hoists Hanuman's banner over the gleaming ratha and brings the chariot to his cousin's tent. A young servant is strapping the golden mail on his master, which Indra gave Arjuna. Krishna comes in, "Your ratha is here, Kshatriya and your sarathy is ready for battle!"

Last of all, Arjuna sets his kirita, worked with unearthly gemstones, on his head, picks up the Gandiva and the two of them emerge. Completely majestic, they mount the white chariot. Krishna takes the reins, while his pale chargers toss their necks and neigh eagerly in anticipation of battle. Regally, they make their way toward the field, the early sun blazing on Hanuman's banner, the vanara alive on it!

At the front, Arjuna says to Satyaki, "In our excitement, we mustn't forget Drona has sworn to take Yudhishtira captive. What better opportunity could he have than today? Satyaki, your task to protect Yudhishtira will be no less than mine. You are more than equal to it, my friend; I leave my brother's life in your hands."

Satyaki says, "Yudhishtira will be safe as long as there is breath in my body."

Across Kurukshetra, they see Drona's chestnut horses flitting here and there, as the brahmana forms the three vyuhas, one behind the other. In the van, facing the Pandava force, is the shakata vyuha, square and solid, the cart phalanx. Behind the shakata, Drona forms a lotus, a padma vyuha, a subtle variation of the chakra in which Abhimanyu died. Like an artist painting, he forms the indrawn petals of the lotus. Near the last of these, like a stem, Drona

deploys the Kaurava maharathikas in their chariots: the final and most powerful line of defense. He arrays them straight as a needle, a suchi, one after the other, with the precious Jayadratha at the eye of the needle, which faces away from the field.

With dawn, Jayadratha is full of anxiety again. When he hears the Pandava conches and sees Arjuna ride out to the front and stand, stern and erect in the white chariot, Jayadratha begins to quake.

Drona lays a kindly hand on him, “The three vyuhas are six krosas long, Jayadratha. Six krosas will separate you from the frontlines. A hundred thousand horsemen, sixty thousand chariots, three million foot-soldiers, fourteen thousand elephants and then six maharathikas, each one more powerful than all these together, stand between Arjuna and you. Not even the army of Devaloka could break past such a defense before the sun sets. Your eyes will see Surya Deva rise tomorrow, but not Arjuna’s!”

Jayadratha is hardly consoled. He peers across six krosas and sees only Arjuna. He sees every feature on the Pandava’s face, as if he already stood next to him. Jayadratha is terribly certain that all Drona’s assurances will not keep Arjuna away. Six krosas and hundreds of thousands of fierce kshatriyas separate the Pandava from him; but when he sees Krishna’s dark form at Arjuna’s chariot-head, he knows that not six oceans would be enough.

Today Drona sets himself at the rim of the padma vyuha. Between him and the Pandava army lies the stolid square of the shakata. One of Duryodhana’s bravest brothers, Durmarshana, begs to command this phalanx. Drona lets him meet Arjuna’s first charge. With his legion of bowmen around him, Durmarshana takes his proud place at the head of Duryodhana’s army.

Duryodhana’s brother is certain Arjuna will not pass him. “I won’t let him through. Arrogant Arjuna shall taste Durmarshana’s valor today!”

FOURTEEN

ARJUNA THE MAGNIFICENT

Arjuna's armor radiates lances of fear across Kurukshetra. The Gandiva glitters, already piercing Jayadratha's heart. To that king, hidden behind the teeming Kaurava army, Arjuna seems like the God of death. The Pandava raises the Devadatta and blows a long, echoing blast. The Kaurava frontlines cower at the sound and when Krishna joins a deep note to it on the Panchajanya, Jayadratha whimpers in his chariot.

Conches resound on both sides for the fighting to begin. Arjuna raises his arm high and cries to his sarathy, "Let us burn this shoddy cart. Ride at them, Krishna, the sun waits for no man!"

Krishna flicks his whip over his horses' sleek necks. Durmarshana roars like five tigers and charges out of his vyuha to meet Arjuna. Their bows streaming, the cousins fly at each other. Durmarshana fights as never before and for a while it seems he will hold Arjuna up. Arrow cuts down arrow in flight, or glances off warriors' stubborn mail. But the equal contention lasts only a few moments. Suddenly, Arjuna lifts his archery and heads roll off necks in a macabre pageant. When Arjuna fights like this, no one can see where he bends his bow, or draws another arrow from his magic quivers; or where he aims it, true as death. They see just a blur in his chariot. At times, it seems he hardly moves at all; but enemy soldiers fall in waves before him, blood spilling on to the dark earth from their carved limbs and wounds through which their spirits fly out to the invisible hosts waiting above Kurukshetra to take them to other realms. Arjuna dissevers their heads so casually: as if he snipped mallika flowers from their stems, to offer Siva for worship.

The air is a murky opacity of ghosts and screams. Not a sound from the Pandava: save that of his bowstring and the hum of his arrows. When five thousand Kaurava soldiers have died, in moments and Duryodhana's brother realizes that today Arjuna also fights as never before, Durmarshana bolts and his men go after him. In the time it takes to tell, Arjuna has smashed the first of Drona's vyuhas: the shakata collapses at his onslaught. And far away, at the eye of the needle he means to thread with a mighty astra today, Jayadratha is near collapse.

As Arjuna's gandharva horses flash forward, Dusasana appears on his path with a legion of elephants, roaring an arrogant challenge. But to the Pandava, it

makes no difference whether it is Dur-marshana or Dusasana, horses or elephants. All that matters is that they come between him and his quarry and he will not let them stand. Grey beasts fall as facilely as men did before them: some shot with a score of wooden shafts all over their hulking bodies, others with just one silver arrow through their hearts. The Gandiva sings, calling the enemy to the ceremony of death.

Mowing through his legion, Arjuna comes face to face with Dusasana himself.

He covers his cousin's elephant in a mantle of fire. He shreds the weapons in his hands, makes red flowers sprout all over the Kaurava's body and Dusasana cannot stand Arjuna any longer than his brother Durmarshana did. He, also, turns his beast around and lumbers away quickly. On plunges Arjuna, seeing just Jayadratha before him and all the others merely obstacles to his reaching that king, his target. It was so when he was a boy and Drona's sishya and so it remains. Drona watches him fly at the padma vyuha and is reminded of the day when he gathered his students under a tree in which he had set a wooden bird and asked each one what he saw. Arjuna saw only the bird's eye and brought it down. Today, Jayadratha is the wooden bird and the soldiers guarding him just the leaves in the tree. Like an arrow, Arjuna makes for his prey, brushing the leaves aside.

The white chariot storms the rim of the second vyuha and Drona rides up to stop his favorite sishya. Arjuna folds his hands to his master and says, "I have come to avenge my child. Once you said you made no difference between Aswatthama and me and I pray you still feel the same way. Bless me, Acharya and let me into your vyuha."

Drona raises his bow in reply. With a smile, he cries, "You cannot enter my vyuha without defeating me!"

Though Drona was the main conniver in yesterday's treachery, Arjuna cannot find it in himself to hate his master. Without rancor, he looses his first volley at his guru and those shafts are deadlier for the detachment with which they are shot. Drona answers with a scorching salvo of his own and a tremendous duel begins.

How well each one knows the other's mind; how perfectly they anticipate every shaft. But they are not master and pupil any more: Arjuna is more than his Acharya's equal. The Pandava breaks Drona's bow; before the pieces fall to the chariot-floor, the master has another one out.

For an hour, they duel; and at first, one has a slender advantage, then the other. They fight at the farthest reaches of their genius, until abruptly Krishna cries, "It isn't Drona you have sworn to kill before the sun sets. Time flits by and every moment is precious. Leave the brahmana here, we must break into the vyuha!"

Krishna swerves his horses away; he drives them round Drona's chariot in a pradakshina. Smiling, Arjuna cries to the Acharya, "My lord, I must leave you!"

Drona roars, "What is this, Arjuna? You ride away from an enemy without beating him? You have never done this before."

Flashing away to storm the padma vyuha, Arjuna calls back, "You are not my enemy, but my guru! Bless me, that I succeed."

The words are borne to Drona on the wind. For the time he has lost fighting his master, arrows flare thicker than ever from the Pandava's bow and Kaurava soldiers fall before him in lurid waves and a swell of mortal screams. At Arjuna's wheels, guarding his rear and flanks, ride the Panchala brothers, Yuddhamanyu and Uttamaujas, as they have since the war began. Kritavarman comes to challenge Arjuna and with him Sudakshina, lord of the Kambhojas and Srutayus. Their arrows darken the sky. But those shafts themselves are livid and illumine dim Kurukshetra like strange lamps, flying.

Drona swirls round at the mouth of the lotus and rides after Arjuna. His careful plans foiled by the Pandava breezing past him, the master dashes after his disciple in anger. The gifted Kritavarman holds Arjuna up and it seems that Arjuna hesitates to unleash his fiercer missiles at the Yadava. Krishna cries, "He is one of the six that murdered your child! Don't stay your hand because he is my cousin. He is a traitor and deserves to die."

No sooner has he spoken, than Kritavarman is struck down with ten sizzling shafts that break his bow and smash through his armor, so he falls screaming. His sarathy flies from the field with his bleeding kshatriya. After Kritavarman departs, Sudakshina cannot resist Arjuna for more than a few moments. The Pandava sweeps him aside and plunges on deeper into the vyuha. A better warrior than Sudakshina looms in his path: Srutayudha who wields Varuna's mace. The mace is a magical weapon and no one can kill Srutayudha as long as he carries it. When he casts it at an enemy, it divides itself into a hundred maces and strikes like a flock of thunderbolts; and then, it flies back to his hand. But Varuna had said to Srutayudha he must never cast the mace at anyone who bore no arms, for then it would turn on the one who cast it.

Srutayudha harries Arjuna with the Sea God's mace, but finds he can never strike the Pandava because of Krishna's lightning maneuvers in the gandharva chariot. Forgetting that the sarathy carries no weapon, Srutayudha flings the mace at Krishna. The occult gada takes Krishna in his chest, but softly as flowers. With a roar of its own, in anger that it has been cast at an unarmed man, the ocean mace flashes back at Srutayudha and smashes his head like a peach. As soon as he falls, Varuna's weapon vanishes from Kurukshetra; it returns to the Lord of tides.

Seeing Srutayudha die, Sudakshina turns back into battle against Arjuna. But the duel lasts just moments and the Pandava kills the lord of the Kambhojas with an arrow through his heart. Panic takes the Kaurava army. Drona roars above the pandemonium to his legions, to surround Arjuna, they must not let him move ahead. But who can stand before the Pandava today? Drona rushes forward himself, covering Arjuna in a fever of arrows. Arjuna burns them all up with a brahmastra and they fall away as ashes. Fifty thousand footsoldiers run at Arjuna's chariot. But he is dauntless; he is implacable, as he cuts a way of fire before him with unearthly missiles, parting the dark tide of men in streams of blood.

On through the incarnadine mire the golden chariot ploughs, as if no army stood in its way. Until, two heroic brothers challenge the Pandava: Srutayus and Achutayus, dead Sudakshina's friends, who have rashly sworn to avenge him. They fly unexpectedly at Arjuna from two sides and Srutayus strikes Krishna unconscious. When the Pandava's chariot lurches to a stop, Achutayus casts a javelin at Arjuna, a lance like a green star and strikes him deep in his side. A roar goes up from the Kaurava army as Arjuna reels and the Gandiva slips from his hand. The Pandava totters against his flagstaff.

"Arjuna is slain!" cry the Kaurava soldiers.

But in their excitement, they don't press home their brief advantage quickly enough. With a cry, Krishna recovers, seizes the reins again and veers away from Srutayus' ominous fire. By Krishna's grace, Arjuna's wound is stanchd and the jade lance falls out. Quicker than thinking, the Pandava invokes the aindrastra to quell the thousand arrows that flare at him from every side. With another shaft of power, he cuts down the two brothers on either side of him. A single arrow, which severs Sru-tayus' head, flies on in uncanny trajectory and crashes into Achutayus' heart.

Seeing four of their kshatriyas die in moments, the common Kaurava soldiers run in panic from Arjuna. The padma vyuha is breached and every

instant the golden chariot flies nearer its quarry, hidden fearfully in the needle's eye.

FIFTEEN

AT THE RIM OF THE RED LOTUS

Beside himself to see Arjuna storm into the padma vyuha, Duryodhana rides wildly up to Drona. He cries at his Acharya, “Arjuna smashes through your legions as if they are not there at all! Your shakata vyuha fell apart at his first charge and he has broken into your lotus as if it is made of petals, not soldiers. We do everything in our power to please you, Acharya, but you betray our cause. Your heart is not with me, but with the Pandavas. You stood at the vyuha’s rim and I know that no one could pass you unless you let them.”

Drona begins to speak, but Duryodhana rages, “My lord, the deadliest enemy is the one you have taken to your heart in trust. He is like a knife hidden in a pot of honey. I believed you, Drona, when you said Jayadratha would be safe. But look how Arjuna flies at him like a naracha. Why sunset, Jay-adratha will die before noon.

I should have let him ride home; he would have been safer in his own country. I have sacrificed my brother-in-law to Yama; why, he would be safer facing Yama than Arjuna, if my cousin reaches him. You must stop him, Drona. You are this army’s Senapati!”

Stung, Drona replies, “You saw me try, but he is as quick as the mind. I am old, Duryodhana, past my prime. Most warriors I can still contain; but this is Arjuna, there is no one like him. And then his horses are gandharva steeds, Krishna is his sarathy!

But I could keep another vow today. With Arjuna away, I could take Yudhishtira. Let a younger man pursue Arjuna: none better than you, Duryodhana. It will hearten your men to see you lead them from the front; and you can avenge your four friends he killed.”

Duryodhana’s face turns darker. “Do you mock me, Acharya? That you send me after a kshatriya who swept past you so easily. How can I stop him when the great Drona could not? You saw him strike Kritavarman down. You stood at the lip of your vyuha, like Siva with his Pinaka. But even as you watched him, he killed Srutayudha, Srutayus, Achutayus and Sudakshina, as if they were children. And you ask me to ride after Arjuna? Acharya, you are our only hope, everything depends on you. You must save us today!”

A smile softens Drona’s face. “You are like my own son, Duryodhana, I

wouldn't send you to your death. Look, I have this armor I have kept just for you." He shows Duryodhana that mail, like treasure in his hands. Duryodhana gasps. "This is Brahma's own kavacha, its links are ancient mantras and not even the devastras can pierce it. Indra wore this armor when he fought Vritrasura. Come, let me help you put it on."

Duryodhana climbs down from his chariot and allows Drona to wrap him in Brahma's golden mail. Wearing it, he feels a surge of magic in his blood. He kneels before his guru for his blessing. Laughing, Drona blesses him. Duryodhana says, "Forgive me for what I said rashly to you."

"Even as a father forgives his son," replies Drona. "Now go like the wind and you will beat Arjuna today!"

As if Brahma's armor touched him with unworldly courage, Duryodhana rides roaring after the Pandava. Seeing their king fly to the rescue, the Kaurava soldiers stream back into battle. This is at the very heart of the red lotus.

Meanwhile, only Arjuna and Yuddhamanyu and Uttamaujas at his chariot-wheels have broken into the padma vyuha. Drona turns back to the rim of the lotus, where Dhrishtadyumna and the Pandava army storm the phalanx that Arjuna has breached. The two armies meet like the golden Ganga and the midnight-blue Yamuna flowing into each other during a flood. But Drona fights as if for his life and the Pandava legions can make no headway against him. The brahmana's astras light up Kurukshetra, they consume Yudhishtira's legions and, inexorably, Drona forges nearer Yudhishtira himself.

Duryodhana's brothers fight beside their Senapati. Bheema and his brothers face Vivimsati, Chi-trasena and Vikarna. Vinda and Anuvinda face Virata and Shalya confronts Yudhishtira. Dusasana and Satyaki battle, Shakuni meets Madri's twins. Shikhandi and Baahlika fight, while Ghatotkacha and Alambusa lock again in a vicious mayic duel. Far away, beyond Arjuna forging on alone through the padma vyuha, Aswatthama and Karna stand guard over Jayadratha, with Bhoorisravas and his army, Kripa, Sala and Durjaya.

Baahlika and Dhrishtadyumna duel briefly, then Draupadi's sons stream forward, an army by themselves and their battle with Baahlika is like the war of the five senses against the mind! Satyaki and Dusasana light the air between them with igneous shafts that extinguish each other in flight. But Dusasana fights in inspiration today and finds his mark with a blinding arrow that strikes Satyaki unconscious in his chariot. The Yadava's sarathy rides away from battle, until his warrior recovers. Satyaki is up in a moment, flaming back at Dusasana.

Dhrishtadyumna rides at Drona and a refulgent duel breaks out. Duryodhana's sharpness has stung his Acharya deeply and he fights beyond himself now: to reach Yudhishtira at any cost. The old master overwhelms Dhrishtadyumna. He smashes his chariot, kills the horses and sarathy of his old enemy's son. Growling, Dhrishtadyumna seizes up a sword and leaps on to Drona's horses. Nimble as the wind he runs along their backs at his master. This is not less than deliverance for the brahmana: the man born to kill him makes an absurdly easy target.

Drona raises his bow, with an astra that will blow the fire-prince to pieces at such short range. He draws back his bowstring and for a moment that lasts a life, Dhrishtadyumna sees death face to face. He springs forward along the horses' backs, knowing he cannot reach Drona before the Acharya's arrow blasts him to bits. For an eternity, Drona's bowstring remains drawn back and with hallucinatory clarity, Dhrishtadyumna sees every detail of the master's powerful hand, his fingers, the rings on them, the deep wrinkles on his face, the smile on his lips, every hair in his beard, the look almost of surprise in his eyes that the kshatriya born to kill him makes such a rash gift of his own life. All this is emblazoned on Dhrishtadyumna's mind.

For another eternity, Drona's hand remains, quivering, where it has pulled back his bowstring. Dhrishtadyumna wants to shut his eyes but finds he cannot. Then, he hears a noise deafening the huge silence that has fallen over his world: the sound of an arrow cleaving the air, loud as a tempest. Dhrishtadyumna waits in that awful moment for the shaft to tear his chest open. Instead, he sees a flicker of shock in Drona's eyes. He sees the tremor that passes through the master's hand. He sees his bowstring sag and its arrow drop on to the chariot floor. He hears its clatter mingle with the swish of Satyaki's timely barb humming past after it severs Drona's bowstring, saving Dhrishtadyumna's life.

Drupada's son still stands petrified, but Satyaki flashes up, sweeps his friend out of his daze and into his chariot before Drona can recover. With a feral roar at being done out of his priceless prey, whose life he held in the palm of his hand for that moment, Drona seizes up another bow and covers the dashing Satyaki in a swath of arrows. But the Yadava in his fleeting chariot fights like his master, Arjuna, today. Quick as light, he breaks Drona's bowstring again; and while the furious brahmana reaches for another weapon, Satyaki strikes him deep with darts like fire.

Drona cries to his sarathy, "Ride at Yudhishtira! It is him we must take today."

But Satyaki cries to his charioteer, “The brahmana who takes up arms is more terrible than any kshatriya. For his pride is great and his mind is subtle. Drona is the heart of the Kaurava army. Ride at him, friend, fly between him and Yudhishtira!”

In a steep swirl, Satyaki confronts Drona again. Drona attacks the Yadava in wrath, meaning to kill him now. But Arjuna’s pupil fights back magnificently and the war pauses around them to watch their duel. Drona mutters to himself, between burning shafts, “He fights like Bheeshma or Arjuna, like Bhargava or Karttikeya. Arjuna’s sishya is his guru’s peer!”

Twice more, Satyaki breaks Drona’s bow in his hand. The Acharya’s face is red. He looses an agneyastra, of a hundred billowing flames, to consume Satyaki, his chariot and all. The raging weapon, used commonly against a whole legion, flares at the Yadava in flash-fire. A lesser kshatriya may have panicked to see that inferno. But serene Satyaki, poised, quicksilver Satyaki has learned well from his master. He invokes a varunastra of the Lord of the sea and douses Drona’s fireball in a crested blue wave, tall as a hill.

Not only the awestruck soldiers of both armies on the field, but Devas and gandharvas, charanas and apsaras, have gathered in the sky to watch this duel. Drenched in water from Satyaki’s varunastra, his shaft of agni put out, Drona roars on Kurukshetra so the ground shakes under his chariot wheels. But before the duel can resume, Nakula and Sahadeva, Bheema and Yudhishtira ride to Satyaki’s side. In a moment, Dhrishtadyumna in a fresh chariot, Virata and the Kekaya brothers are beside him, as well; and from the Kaurava ranks, Dusasana, with a score of his brothers, arrives to fight for Drona. The battle spreads out again, as the armies fall at each other.

Though he has been frustrated in his attempt on Yudhishtira and is furious at the Yadava responsible, Drona is still warrior enough, artist enough, to admire the relucant valor of young Satyaki.

SIXTEEN

DEEP INTO THE ENEMY'S ARMY

The sun rises to his zenith and begins his descent in the sky. Blazing midday finds Arjuna and Krishna battling not just the Kaurava army, but time himself. Arjuna is twice as fierce as when he began and Krishna's horses respond not just to their reins he holds, but to his very thought. Like steeds of light they flit, weaving dizzily through the enemy, while Arjuna's arrows cut a hot path ahead of them.

But unlike the Pandava and his dark sarathy, the white horses begin to tire. Their career through two dense vyuhas has been long and hard and, nearing the end of Drona's lotus, they turn sluggish. Their coats are drenched in sweat; there is foam at their mouths and their flanks are bloody with arrows. Those unearthly horses, given Arjuna by Chitrasena the gandharva, cannot be killed; but they do tire and their bodies heave from thirst.

Jayadratha is still far away, beyond the final petal of the lotus, three-fourths of a krosa from Arjuna; and the greatest Kaurava warriors stand between the Pandava and his prey. The sun sinks in the west and the Kaurava soldiers are heartened by the sight of the exhausted horses. Seeing the white chariot slow to a crawl, the Avanti brothers, Vinda and Anuvinda, ride at Arjuna in the hope that speed will give them a telling advantage.

They roar a challenge at the Pandava. They cover not just him, but his thirsty horses and his blue sarathy with arrows. Blinding Arjuna breaks the bows in their hands. But Krishna can hardly maneuver his chariot any more; his horses slow to a walk, panting. Seizing the chance, Vinda attacks Arjuna from ahead and Anuvinda from the rear. How will he resist them both, when Yuddhamanyu and Uttamauijas have been left far behind and have rejoined Dhrishtadyumna's legion? But Arjuna will not let anyone hold him up. On another day, he may have indulged himself in a prolonged duel with the gifted brothers. Today, he takes Vinda's head off his neck with a crescent-tipped shaft and bloodies Anuvinda's chest, before cutting off his arms and legs and then his head.

Crying out, the Kauravas swarm at the white chariot from every side. Arjuna swivels where he stands, the Gandiva spewing an iridescence of arrows all around him. He holds them off, as fresh as when he began, killing hundreds. Then, he tells Krishna, "The horses are wounded and thirsty. They will not reach Jayadratha unless they rest."

Krishna replies, "They must be unyoked and their wounds tended. They must drink, or they will drop. But how?"

He sounds worried. He wonders if he should raise the Panchajanya and blow a rishabha on it. But Arjuna says calmly, "Unyoke them, Krishna. Let them rest."

"Here?"

"It is as good a place as any," smiles the Pandava. "You tend to them, I will fight on foot."

Arjuna climbs down from the chariot. He looks like Kamadeva, standing there with the Gandiva in his hand as if it were the Love God's sugarcane bow. The Kauravas roar to each other, "Look! Arjuna's horses can't run any more."

"He stands helpless on the ground. This is the time to kill him!"

"Surround him. Cover him with arrows!"

So they do, running at him in excitement. But too soon: Arjuna on the ground is deadlier than Arjuna in his chariot. Rushing forward recklessly, thinking they have him at their mercy now, they hardly see the Pandava move; but a tide of arrows rises around him. It sweeps in every direction and turns into a red wave of screams. The Kaurava soldiers shrink from him, gripped by a fear deeper than the fear of death.

Arjuna stands, a flame on Kurukshetra and there is nothing his enemies can do about him. As disdainfully as he slew them from his chariot, he slaughters them standing on the earth. Krishna says, "There is no water anywhere, how will the horses drink?"

Hardly as if he was fighting a battle, Arjuna replies, "But, my Lord, there is water just behind you. Look."

Between scathing volleys, he invokes a varunastra. At once, where a moment ago there was only arid ground with hardly a blade of grass growing, a lake shimmers in the noonday sun, its surface covered with lotuses, why, swans floating there! That water is sweet and clear, bounded on all sides by Arjuna's incredible arrows. There is even a fine pavilion on its banks with steps leading down to the water: all made of arrows.

Krishna laughs aloud; the Kaurava soldiers stand gaping. The Dark One unyokes his horses and leads them to the sparkling lake. First, he lets them drink, then gently plucks out the barbs that stick in their sides. He speaks softly to them all the while; he has tears in his eyes that they were hurt.

Meanwhile, the Kaurava soldiers have stopped fighting. Instead, they cry to each other, “A lake with one arrow!”

“With lotuses and swans.”

“How inviting it seems. I would rather swim in Arjuna’s lake than fight him.”

“Look!” cries another soldier, pointing to the sky. Flights of water birds, goose and duck, ibis and teal have spotted the lake from on high and glide down onto its cool blueness. And the Kaurava legions, enchanted, stand watching Krishna tend to the elven horses with boundless love. So tranquil is his dark face, so absorbed: as if he is not on brutal Kurukshetra, surrounded by a million bloodthirsty enemies, but back in Vrindavana with his gopis, on the banks of a charmed pool in that forest.

In no hurry at all, he washes the blood from their wounds, healing them with his touch. He strokes their sides, speaking to them in a tongue of the gandharvas. When he has rubbed them down, he splashes them with the crisp water and lets them drink again to their hearts’ content. Their thirst quenched, their spirits revived, the pale horses toss their heads and whinny to show they are ready to be yoked again. The wonderful beasts know, as well as any man on Kurukshetra, that this is an exceptional day and there is a critical mission on hand.

Still in no hurry, Krishna yokes his horses once more. Taking his time, he brings the chariot to his kshatriya. With no sign of being pressed for time himself, Arjuna climbs back into it; and this complete calm, in the face of a rapidly westering sun, unnerves the Kaurava army. Seeing Arjuna’s miracle with the lake, seeing how confident both he and Krishna are, Duryodhana’s soldiers have no doubt that Jayadratha will die before the sun sets.

At last, the Pandava’s chariot sets out toward Jayadratha again. Their morale destroyed by his cool assurance, now Duryodhana’s men make easy prey for him. Like the wind in Devaloka, fly the white horses. In moments, leaving a thousand men dead in their wake, Arjuna and Krishna arrive at the very end of Drona’s formidable padma vyuha and they smash through the last petals of the lotus.

Ahead lies the needle made of the Kaurava maharathikas, with Jayadratha at its eye. Now, Krishna and Arjuna actually see that king for the first time since the day’s fighting began: cowering in his chariot, his face ashen. Jayadratha sees them, as well. He knows that two of Drona’s invincible vyuhās have fallen apart

at Arjuna's advent and just a slender stalk of warriors separates him from death. He stands shaking in his chariot. Arjuna forges nearer.

Then, a roar goes up from the Kaurava soldiers. Suddenly another royal ratha breaks out of the sharp tip of the suchi. In it, his lean form covered in golden mail, stands a dark kshatriya determined he will stop the Pandava. It is Duryodhana come to fight for Jayadratha, as if that king's life is his own: Duryodhana come to see that the sun sets on Arjuna's defeat.

Krishna says to Arjuna, "Be careful. Remember a desperate man fights like ten others. Duryodhana hasn't faced you yet, show him what it means to fight Arjuna! Kill this one man and the war will end."

Arjuna says softly, "Here is the man who caused us years of grief, who broke my brother's heart. He has so much to pay for. But I wonder how he comes to fight me so boldly today."

Duryodhana stands laughing in his chariot and cries, "Come cousin, fight! I have heard all about the astras you have, show me your valor."

Quick as love, he shoots ten arrows at them, black fire. Krishna and Arjuna cry out. Arjuna replies with a volley sharp as serpents' fangs. His arrows glance off Duryodhana and the Kaurava's laughter rocks the field.

"Is this the best you can do? I fear for your life if it is!"

And another potent volley has Krishna crying, "His arrows are like poison. I have never felt such pain before!"

The Dark One swings his chariot here and there to avoid Duryodhana's shafts. Arjuna shoots back, a hundred astras, each of which would have killed a hundred men. But they graze off Duryodhana like green stems of flowers; his hooded eyes flash at them, his exultant roaring is louder still. Krishna assumes that Arjuna does not shoot fiercely enough at his cousin. To goad the Pandava, he says, "Duryodhana masters you effortlessly and the sun plunges down like a fishing hawk. We might as well admit we are beaten and turn back."

Arjuna cries, "Why do you mock me, Krishna? It is not Duryodhana we are fighting but Brahma's golden kavacha in which Drona has wrapped him! Look how it shines under his tunic. But I have the astra to pierce this armor. Indra gave it to me in Amravati."

Stung by another shaft like fire, Krishna cries, "Then use it quickly! Time slips away from us."

Arjuna sets a silver arrow to his bow. He invokes the manavastra, with

which Rama once killed Maricha. The arrow is a band of lava in his hands. Arjuna draws his bowstring to his ear, but in a blur another archer cuts that shaft in two. The astra vanishes with a hiss of anger. Arjuna whirls around to see Aswatthama grinning at him.

Arjuna roars his frustration. “I can’t summon the manavastra again, it will kill me the next time! But watch me, Krishna, I have a way to make him run. Look how the fool wears his priceless mail: like a bullock carrying a treasure on its back, never knowing its worth. And the kavacha doesn’t cover all of him.”

Arjuna aims some slender shafts, like needles, at the exposed parts of Duryodhana’s body; he shoots at his cousin’s fingers. The fine barbs pierce the Kaurava’s nails and strike deep into his palms. Wringing his hands, Duryodhana flings down his bow and screams to his sarathy to ride away. Krishna’s delighted laughter rings across Kurukshetra. Not two hours remain before sunset.

The maharathikas of the suchimukha vyuha and their armies, surround Arjuna’s chariot, so Krishna can hardly maneuver; they are still two leagues from Jayadratha. Krishna cries, “Pull on your bowstring, Arjuna. Let me hear the thunder of the Gandiva!”

As at some great vina, Arjuna pulls at the string of his bow. The war resounds with the twanging. Exhilarated, Krishna raises the Panchajanya, of the hue of clouds, to his lips and blows blast after blast at the sky. These sounds reverberate across Kurukshetra and Jayadratha trembles even more in his chariot.

As if in response to the challenge, Bhoorisravas, Sala, Karna, Vrishasena, Kripa, Shalya and Aswatthama attack Arjuna, at once: eight kshatriyas with their legions. But Arjuna is godlike. He sees only Jayadratha before his mind’s eye; all these others are leaves in his way, to be brushed aside. Prodigious Aswatthama has his fire returned to him ten-fold, so he faints in his chariot. Karna, Vrishasena and Shalya attack the Pandava in a knot. Tremendous Arjuna routs them all and the others that bar his way to Jayadratha.

Krishna looks up and sees the rim of the sun not far above the western mountain. Arjuna’s heart skips a beat when he follows his sarathy’s gaze. But neither of them will show, by so much as a flicker on their faces, how anxious they are; though, perhaps Arjuna’s archery bears a trace of desperation. While to Krishna and his warrior the sun seems to fall like a meteor in the sky, to their enemies the star appears to sink so slowly it takes a lifetime to go down.

SEVENTEEN

THE SOUND OF KRISHNA'S CONCH

Meanwhile, a krosa behind Arjuna's chariot, the bulk of the two armies fights on. Yudhishtira faces Drona, who has sworn to take him captive. Angered by the Acharya's oath, Yudhishtira covers him in arrows, wounds sprouting on the brahmana like poppies. Drona is taken aback; it will hardly be simple to capture the Pandava if he fights like this. Yudhishtira looses a febrile shakti at Drona, which he cuts down with an astra.

Yet, all the while Drona presses forward in his chariot, nearer and nearer Yudhishtira. When he is close enough, like summer lightning he casts a mace at the Pandava. But the master has taught his pupil well: quick as seeing, Yudhishtira smashes that gada aside with his own. Still the impact rocks him back on his heels. Drona cuts down his banner, kills his horses and lights his ratha with an astra. Yudhishtira saves himself by leaping out, just in time; but his chariot bursts apart in a flash of flames.

Yudhishtira stands defenseless on the ground and Drona darts at him like a striking cobra. The Pandava has landed on his feet and some of his soldiers rush forward to protect him. Drona shoots a shaft of sleep at them and they all fall in a swoon. Like a tiger a lamb, Drona stalks Yudhishtira; he is hardly five chariot-lengths away and there is an outcry from the Pandava army. Then Satyaki flits between the brahmana and his quarry. The Yadava covers Drona in a dazzle of arrows. He flies at Yudhishtira, sweeps him into his chariot and rides away. Drona's roars echo around him.

A thousand duels rage across Kurukshetra. One of the Kekaya brothers, Brihadkshatra, battles a Kaurava ally called Kshemadhurti. Both are splendid archers. They fight long and evenly, until Kshe-madhurti breaks past Bhihadkshatra's defenses and draws first blood. Next moment, the Kekaya cuts Kshemadhurti's head from his neck.

A Trigarta called Viradhanva fights as if to avenge himself today on the Pandava army for all his brothers and soldiers Arjuna killed yesterday. Viradhanva kills a thousand men, before Dhrishtaketu, lord of the Chedis, rides up to challenge him. Another intense duel begins. Finally, Dhrishtaketu casts a whistling javelin at the Trigarta. It nails him to his flagstaff.

Once more, Satyaki, Nakula and Sahadeva are at the van of the Pandava

army and no one can stop them. Yudhishtira's legions forge ahead. Drona comes again to hunt the Pandava king and again Satyaki intervenes brilliantly. Realizing he cannot reach Yudhishtira without beating the Yadava, Drona engages Satyaki in a duel. But Satyaki is young and exceptional and the brahmana can make no headway against him.

The battle between the lord of Sala and Draupadi's five princes rages on, an interminable contention: the war between the mind and senses. But in the end, Sala cannot stand against those mercurial youths. Sahadeva's son shoots him through the throat and Sala falls.

Bheema fights Alambusa briefly, but the rakshasa cannot face the son of the wind. He melts away with maya and kills a hundred Pandava soldiers. More than anything, Alambusa terrifies Yudhishtira's legions because he anoints himself in the gore of those he kills. He eats their flesh, quaffs their blood and drapes himself with their entrails. He makes himself truly horrific and even the Kaurava soldiers shrink from him. But Ghatotkacha has long been stalking Alambusa and now he arrives, sleek as a dark panther, to confront him. Rakshasa and rakshasa fight. Fangs and talons flash, blood spraying from them. The pair no longer uses maya, or any weapon except their own bodies. They fight hand to hand, with sinister hisses and cries that make the other soldiers turn to watch, their hair standing on end. It is a long battle; both rakshasas are determined only one of them will live.

Yudhishtira cries to Nakula near him, "How like Bheema Ghatotkacha looks! How like him he fights. Aren't you reminded of when Bheema and Hidimba fought in the vana?"

Alambusa cries, "Rakshasa, you fight for the wrong army and you will die!"

"Not at your hands, Rakshasa," replies Ghatotkacha and, in a blur, seizes his foe. He lifts him high above his head just as his father might have. The strength of his grandsire Vayu in his arms, he flings Alambusa down again, explosively, so his limbs fly off his trunk and his fiendish head, the scream on its white lips cut off.

A roar goes up from the Pandava army. Fear rips through Drona's legions. Alambusa came out of the jungle to fight for Duryodhana, so he could avenge his friend Baka. Now, Bheema's son has killed him and he lies like a mountain riven on Kurukshetra.

Yudhishtira rushes up to embrace Ghatotkacha and a glowing Bheema does,

as well. It is then that they hear Krishna's Panchajanya booming across Kurukshetra, again and again, as if he was in dire distress. The thunder of the Gandiva is drowned and Krishna does this on purpose. He knows they will need help to reach Jayadratha before sunset and he knows Arjuna will refuse to call for any, if he asks him. Yudhishtira hears the Panchajanya resound, lonely across two vyuhas. He hears Kaurava conches blaring in response. But he does not hear the Devadatta or the Gandiva. Panic grips Yudhishtira. He is certain Arjuna is in trouble and Krishna is calling for help.

His heart pounding, Yudhishtira rides to Satyaki. He cries to the Yadava, "Krishna calls for help, Arjuna is in danger. Fly to your guru, Satyaki, he needs you!"

Satyaki says, "Arjuna needs no one's help against these Kauravas. I have no worry for him, but for you. An hour ago, the Acharya almost had you, Yudhishtira. It would be foolish to tempt fate again. Drona by himself is more dangerous than all the others together. My place is here at your chariot-wheel, with Bheema and Dhrishtadyumna."

Yudhishtira will not listen. "All that is true. But Satyaki, I am certain Arjuna has desperate need of you. Bheema and Dhrishtadyumna, Draupadi's sons, the Kekayas, Ghatotkacha, Drupada, Shikhandi, Nakula, Sahadeva, Dhrishtaketu, Kuntibhoja and all my army protect me. They will keep me safe from Drona. But only you can pierce the Kaurava legions quickly enough to help my brother. Fly Satyaki, I beg you, don't hesitate!"

Satyaki cannot bear to think that he did not rush to Arjuna's side, when he most needed him; any more than he can bear to leave Yudhishtira at Drona's mercy. He would never forgive himself, if either Pandava came to harm. But there is no denying the truth of what Yudhishtira says: Arjuna fights alone and time presses him more urgently.

Satyaki makes up his mind. "I hate to leave you, my lord, but I will ride to Arjuna. The Kaurava army roars like the sea under a full moon and I long to be at them. I need more weapons and my horses must drink before I go. It is a long way to the suchimukha."

Yudhishtira gives orders for Satyaki's horses to be tended quickly; and for his chariot to be stocked with every weapon he might need. Satyaki must cross two vyuhas. The first Arjuna had razed; but the padma vyuha is still formidable and Drona stands guard over it again. Satyaki has fought a long, hard day already. He has fought two enervating duels with the Acharya: once when he rescued Dhrishtadyumna and then when he snatched Yudhishtira from Drona's

clutches. The Yadava decides he needs a brief rest himself; though, his heart sings at the thought of breaking through the Kaurava army, to watch his master's moment of glory when he kills Jayadratha.

Satyaki rides back to the Pandava camp, where he pours cold water over himself, changes his battle-dress and drinks a jar of black bees' honey to invigorate himself. All this takes hardly any time and the kshatriya is ready for his mission. His chariot is brought back to him, its panels bristling with weapons, the horses refreshed, for they too have been bathed. Satyaki's sarathy is Daruka's brother; and above his chariot, the banner of a golden lion flutters proudly. Wearing a garland of wild flowers, a vanamala blessed with puja, Satyaki mounts his ratha: and he looks quite like his cousin, the Dark One himself, as he prepares to set out. The sun is plummeting, every moment.

Yudhishtira sends Bheema some way with Satyaki. Like two maruts, they forge through the ruins of the shakata vyuha. Seeing Drona loom in their path, Satyaki stops his chariot. He says to Bheema, "When he sees me go, the brahmana will come for Yudhishtira again. Guard your brother well, Bheema, there is more danger here than at the heart of the lotus."

"Yudhishtira will be safe. Fly now, my friend, the sun won't wait for you or me!"

They embrace briefly. Then Satyaki's chariot flashes away and Bheema stands gazing after him, as the wind blows the Yadava's long hair behind him.

At Yudhishtira's side, Dhrishtadyumna says, "The omens of earth and sky favor us. Satyaki will cover himself in glory. But let us prepare ourselves for the Acharya."

EIGHTEEN

TERRIBLE SATYAKI

Satyaki, the whirlwind, blasts through the remains of the shakata vyuha. The Kaurava soldiers attack him in fury, but he blows them away: blood flying everywhere and screams ringing, as the Yadava storms on. In a few moments, at the edge of the padma vyuha, a smiling Drona confronts Satyaki. Satyaki has no choice but to fight. Shaft for shaft he matches the canny brahmana and it seems that neither will prevail.

Drona knows what Satyaki has come for and is happy to frustrate his mission. He cries, “Your guru escaped me like a coward when we fought. He folded his hands, made a pradakshina round my chariot and fled. But you won’t escape with your life, unless you mean to be a coward as well.”

It is as if Arjuna has spoken to his pupil through his master’s lips. Satyaki laughs aloud, he roars back at Drona, “A sishya must follow his guru. If Arjuna was a coward before you, O Drona, I am happy to be one as well!”

Satyaki makes a pradakshina around the Acharya’s chariot and flashes away into the padma vyuha. As they skim along, the Yadava cries to his sarathy, “Ahead is Baahlika’s army. Beyond him is the lord of Dravida and beside him Karna’s legion from Anga. Ride at Karna and the Dravida king. Look how Drona races after us. Go like the wind. The sun drops quickly, we must reach Arjuna as soon as we can.

Satyaki, with Drona after him, roars through the Dravida king’s legions and Karna’s, in a furrow of blood. How much like the guru his sishya is: the same swiftness of hand, the same unruffled smile, as if he has all the time in the world to arrive where he is going. Kritavarman sets himself in Satyaki’s path. Satyaki does not acknowledge a Yadava before him; he fights his cousin like any enemy. Krita-varman is familiar with Satyaki’s style and draws blood. For a moment, Satyaki staggers in his chariot. Then he casts a javelin at Kritavarman’s sarathy, so he falls out of his seat. Kritavarman’s horses bolt and it is a while before he can seize the reins and bring them under control. By then Satyaki has gone, out of reach.

Kritavarman lets the advancing Pandava army feel his anger. He smashes their formation, scattering the likes of Bheema, Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumna.

Satyaki ploughs on. He has crossed two great rivers on his way to his

master: Drona, the first and Kritavarman, the second. On flares the Yadava like fire through a dry forest. Jalasandha's legion of elephants appears in his path and, quick as wishing, Kurukshetra is strewn with grey hillocks tinted scarlet. The field looks as if Bheema is abroad. Roaring to see his beasts slain, Jalasandha himself charges Satyaki. He strikes the Yadava in the arm with a light lance and next moment, breaks his bow. Every encounter saps Satyaki's waning strength. He has neither the time nor the stamina for a prolonged duel. The Vrishni seizes up another bow. Two arrows cut away Jalasandha's arms at the shoulders and the third strikes off his head.

Quicker than ever, flies Satyaki, racing the sun to the horizon. But Drona has almost caught up with him and from another direction Duryodhana, also, with a force of his brothers. Already, the Yadava serves the purpose Krishna intended for him: he draws some Kaurava warriors away from Arjuna. Duryodhana surprises the young Yadava. He breaks three bows one after the other in his hands and strikes him with a dozen arrows. Undaunted, Satyaki fights on with second wind, as if he has just begun the day. But he knows his strength will soon give out; he fights as if each shaft he looses might be his last. He kills Duryodhana's horses and the Kaurava has to flee on foot.

Kritavarman, who has just dispersed the Pandava army, charges his cousin again. As he comes, he strikes Satyaki's sarathy with two serpentine narachas and Daruka's brother falls unconscious. Saty-aki's horses rear; but he leaps up onto the chariot-head, seizes the reins in his bow-hand and fights on. Kritavarman's sarathy is wounded and his horses. Satyaki pierces his armor with a naracha of his own and his cousin faints.

No sooner is Kritavarman quelled, than Drona flashes up to bar Satyaki's way. But an inspired Satyaki strikes down Drona's sarathy. When the brahmana takes up the reins himself, Satyaki's charioteer has recovered. Seizing the advantage, Satyaki strikes Drona's horses with slim darts, which hardly wound them but bring excruciating pain. Whinnying in frenzy, the animals bolt. Drona cannot hold them and they hurtle all over Kurukshetra, until the agony in their blood subsides and gradually they grow calm. By then, Satyaki is far away. Drona returns to the lip of the padma vyuha in the dim hope that perhaps, on this bleak day, he may still capture Yudhishtira.

A river in spate, Satyaki rushes on through the Kaurava army and no one can stop him. Those like the gifted archer Sudarshana, who dare try, lie twitching in death's spasms and are soon still. The Kaurava army begins to make way for Satyaki, as if they know that to try to resist him is to die. Among kshatriyas, the

Yadava has killed Jalasandha and Sudarshana; and he has put Duryodhana, Drona and Kritavarman to flight. As for the common soldiers he has killed, there is no count of them, but at least ten thousand men. Mlecchas of Kasi he has slaughtered, Nishadas, Tankanas, Kalingas, Magadhas, Kekayas, Kambhojas, Yavanas and Vasatis.

Looking so very much like his master, Satyaki tears on: deeper and deeper into the Kaurava vyuha. His horses are white, like Arjuna's and he stands just like his guru in his chariot, entirely at his ease. The Yavanas try to block his way, but he smashes through them disdainfully. On he flares and ahead of him, he sees a legion of Kauravas mustered just to bring him down. At the head of the force, resplendent in Brahma's golden mail, is Duryodhana, with his brothers around him.

His eyes shining, Satyaki cries to his sarathy, "Look! An army just to stop us. Ride at them; let me repay some of the debt I owe Arjuna. Let Duryodhana know that Satyaki is Krishna's cousin and Arjuna's sishya and that he is invincible!"

True to his word, in a short, one-sided battle, he destroys Duryodhana's legion. He kills Duryodhana's sarathy and stings the Kaurava's horses so they also bolt as Drona's had. With Duryodhana routed, his army runs from the dreadful Yadava and he has a clear path before him again. Throwing back his head, the Vrishni roars his triumph to heaven, as he scorches on toward Arjuna.

NINETEEN

YUDHISHTIRA'S ANXIETY

Satyaki burns brighter than Arjuna on Kurukshetra; the Yadava has killed more men than his guru. After they are routed themselves, Duryodhana and Dusasana send an unconventional legion against him. These men do not fight with bows or spears, but with slingshots and stones! Their aim is unerring and the force with which they sling their stones phenomenal. Some five hundred of them attack Satyaki; the Kauravas hope, at least, to surprise him. But the raging forest-fire hardly cares whether it consumes the punnaga or the palasa. Laughing at the ludicrous tactic, the Yadava smashes the cata-pultists' missiles into dust with a bank of arrows; and, with a handful of minor astras, he kills them all. These men die almost simultaneously and they scream louder than any others whom Satyaki has dispatched to their fathers in the next world. Greater panic than ever grips the Kaurava army.

Satyaki courses on, leaving his trail of corpses: men and horses, chariots he has riven with streak lightning and elephants keeled over where he shot them. Far away, Drona hears the screams and turns to his sarathy. "Satyaki is more terrible than Arjuna today. We must fight him again."

His charioteer says, "He strews Kurukshetra with bodies, like rice-plants in a field at harvest time. But, my lord, look how far he is from us. If you leave your place to chase Satyaki, the Pandava army will break in and then the slaughter will be ten times what it is."

Even as they speak, a legion of Duryodhana's army rides toward them, in headlong flight from Satyaki. They hardly know where they are fleeing to, only that it is away from the Yadava. At the head of that force is Dusasana, his face red, his eyes bulging from his sleek head and his body drenched in the sweat of fear. Drona rides on to his path and roars at him, "Kshatriya! Where are you running in such fright? You are the yuvaraja. Shame on you."

In Hastinapura, you mocked the Pandavas louder than anyone else did. What happened to that bravado? Listen to me, Dusasana. If you run like this it won't be long before Yudhishtira sits on the throne of Hastinapura and you and your brothers lie moldering among the worms of Kurukshetra!"

Dusasana cringes before his master; his Acharya has not done. "If this is how you mean to win the war, I will tell you a better way, before Bheema drinks

your blood. Ride to your brother and persuade him to give the Pandavas back their kingdom. Then live among the women in your harem and tell them how bravely you fought. After this, no one else will believe you.

Coward! You are not just ruining your own honor; you are destroying the morale of our men. Turn back, Dusasana. Go and stop Satyaki, if you call yourself a kshatriya!”

Without a word, Dusasana turns back from where he came. Mustering the last shreds of his courage, he rides to face Satyaki again. This battle does not last long and Dusasana finds his bow snatched from his hand, his chariot broken and he himself at the Yadava’s mercy. With a dreadful smile, Saty-aki fits a silver shaft to his bow. He draws the bowstring past his ear, his arrow aimed at Dusasana’s heart. Dusasana shuts his eyes and sullies himself. But suddenly, Satyaki gives a shout, “I won’t rob Bheema of his revenge! He has sworn to kill you, your life belongs to him.”

As Dusasana whimpers in relief, Satyaki leaves him and rides on toward the suchimukha vyuha and Arjuna.

When Dusasana rode back to face the ravening Satyaki, Drona turns to the Pandava army again, always stalking Yudhishtira, whom Bheema and Dhrishtadyumna guard like eyelids do eyes. In rage, Drona attacks some of Drupada’s younger sons and kills them easily. Howling to see his brothers die, Dhrishtadyumna flies at Drona. The assault is so sudden Drona faints in his chariot. Dhrish-tadyumna leaps out of his ratha. He draws his sword and runs toward the brahmana. Drona recovers just in time; he seizes his bow and drives Dhrishtadyumna back.

They fight again and Kurukshetra is lit up with astras. Until, fighting for his life, since he knows this prince was born to kill him, Drona burns Dhrishtadyumna’s bow in his hands with an agneyas-tra. Before the Panchala has time to pick up another, Drona rides away, thinking better of the dangerous encounter.

Duryodhana appears to stem the advancing Pandava army. He fights exceptionally today. Dhrishtadyumna, Sahadeva, Nakula, Bheema and Yudhishtira cannot match the Kaurava. He wounds many of them; others have their bows cloven, or their horses killed. His new armor glitters in the late light and the Pandavas have no Arjuna now, to find the chinks in Brahma’s mail. Seeing Duryodhana blaze like that, Drona rides to his side and soon the two of them hold off Yudhishtira’s finest kshatriyas, while thousands of common Pandava soldiers perish all around them.

The eldest of the Kekaya brothers, Brihadkshatra, challenges Drona. They fight long, with clouds of dark arrows, punctuated by flaring astras. With Duryodhana fighting close beside him, Drona wants to show off his best and suddenly he looses a brahmastra at Brihadkshatra. The Kekaya replies with a brahmastra of his own. Kurukshetra seems lit by a second sun, as the two weapons fuse in the sky. Astra quells astra and both fall away in showers of ashes. But the great ayudhas drain the warriors who summon them, bodily and in spirit; and now, though Drona is far the older man, it is Brihadkshatra who tires. Even as the Pandavas shout encouragement to the Kekaya, Drona strikes him with five wooden shafts through his chest. As Brihadkshatra totters in his chariot, the brahmana takes his head off with a sixth, crescent-tipped arrow.

Sisupala's son, Dhrishtaketu, charges Drona with a roar. But it seems the brahmana has lifted his archery to another plane. Dhrishtaketu dies, struck through his heart. A cry goes up from the Pandava soldiers and Drona is a fire, ripping through them. They fly from him in every direction, while Duryodhana watches with a pleased smile.

Jarasandha's son, also called Sahadeva, rides at Drona. He hasn't time even to shoot an arrow at the Kaurava Senapati and his head is struck off by a sickle-headed shaft. In almost the same moment, Drona kills Dhrishtadyumna's son, Kshatradharma, with an arrow that whizzes through a whole legion of soldiers and finds the prince standing idle in his chariot. It is as if the terrible Acharya already extracts revenge from Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna for his own death, which the fire-prince must bring him inevitably. He kills his childhood friend's grandchild.

Duryodhana and his army press home the advantage Drona wins for them. They hunt with terror on Kurukshetra and kill thousands. Now the screams of the Pandava soldiers thicken the air and it seems Drona will raze the enemy by himself. He burns them; he lets frothing vermilion streams on the field of dharma. Yet, while the brahmana turns the tide of war back in Duryodhana's favor, Yudhishtira's anxious eyes hardly notice the battle around him. Instead, they scan the distance for some sign of Arjuna. There is none: no flash of a golden banner, Hanuman animating it, no report of the Gandiva's string, nothing. And now he had sent Satyaki after Arjuna and there is no rumor of the Yadava either.

Yudhishtira thinks he should have never asked Satyaki to follow Arjuna, when the Yadava had been fighting all day. He must send someone after him. But whom? Only Bheema is powerful enough.

Deciding swiftly, Yudhishtira tells his sarathy to take him to Bheema, who stands smoldering at the havoc Drona wreaks. He is startled to see Yudhishtira, ashen and trembling. Bheema cries, “What is it, my brother? Is it Drona who makes you tremble?”

“Bheema, I am afraid. It is so long since Arjuna rode into the padma vyuha and there is no sign of him save Krishna’s desperate calls on the Panchajanya.”

Bheema scoffs, “You worry about Arjuna! Have you forgotten who his sarathy is, that you are so anxious?”

Yudhishtira has tears in his eyes. “I sent Satyaki after Arjuna and there is no sign from him either. I hear no screams from the Kaurava army, so I know my two kshatriyas are at them. All I hear are the enemy’s savage shouts. Bheema, I am terrified that Arjuna has met the same fate as Abhimanyu.” He sobs, “I am sure I have sent Satyaki to his death!”

Bheema is aghast. “Yudhishtira, you mustn’t let fear unhinge you. What will become of the rest of us? Tell me what I can do. I will do anything to make you calm again.”

Yudhishtira says, “I want you to go after Satyaki. Go as far as you can. As soon as you see any sign of him, just roar and I will know all is well.”

At that moment, the Panchajanya resounds across Kurukshetra again, in defiance, in lusty challenge. Yudhishtira blanches. He whispers, “Arjuna is dead! That is Krishna blowing on his conch, as he takes revenge on the Kauravas. Fly Bheema. For your brother’s sake, I beg you, fly! You may save at least Satyaki’s life.”

Bheema smiles wryly. “When Krishna and Arjuna ride into battle, victory rides with them. Satyaki is hardly less valiant than Arjuna; he, too, will come to no harm. Yesterday, all the Kauravas hunted Abhimanyu like a pack of dogs. Today they are more worried for Jayadratha’s life. I don’t think they will even bother trying to kill Arjuna, but only try to hold him up until the sun sets. And they won’t succeed even in that.”

Yudhishtira hardly looks comforted, so Bheema says, “Since you are so anxious, I will ride out to them. Listen for my roar. You will hear it as clearly as the Panchajanya!”

TWENTY

BHEEMA ARRIVES

Bheema rides up to Dhrishtadyumna and says, “Yudhishtira wants me to follow Satyaki and Arjuna. When Drona sees me go, he will come after Yudhishtira again. The Acharya fights like ten men, but my brother will not listen to reason. I must leave him in your hands now, my friend.”

His face drawn, after his son’s death and his brother’s, Dhrishtadyumna says grimly to Bheema, “Drona fears me more than any man. Now he has given me more than one reason to kill him. Go with a light heart, Bheema: Drona won’t come near Yudhishtira, unless he kills Dhrishtadyumna first. And we both know that he will die before I do.”

Just then, another bass from Krishna’s conch booms across the field. Bheema clasps Dhrish-tadyumna briefly. He climbs into his chariot and cries, “Fly, sarathy! We must reach Arjuna before the sun sets.”

Drona sees Bheema’s chariot dash forward and the son of the wind is the last man he wants to enter his vyuha. In a trice, the brahamna is back at the edge of his lotus and bars Bheema’s way. Between Bheema and Drona rides another host, Duryodhana’s brothers all, with Dusasana at their head. Bheema gives them a welcoming roar. All day he has felt shackled to the rest of the army and Yudhishtira. Now, on his own at last and seeing a good score of the hundred he has sworn to kill, excitement grips him.

Dusasana casts a spear at Bheema, pale fire. Bheema smashes it in slivers and great laughter rumbles from him. Then he is at them and he is a force of nature. Seven screams ring across the dharma kshetra. Seven sons of Dhritarashtra fall dead: pierced by Bheema’s arrows, or their heads blown off by the mace Mayaa gave him. Thirty-one, he counts with satisfaction. The rest surround him like ants. He flails at them, killing three more and is splattered with their blood.

“Thirty-four!” roars Bheema and the others run. On rides the Pandava and arrives in Drona’s presence. The Acharya thinks his pupil will greet him reverently, as Arjuna and Satyaki had.

Drona cries, “You cannot enter my vyuha unless you defeat me. Arjuna rode round me in pradak-shina. He folded his hands and slipped past me like a coward. Satyaki followed his guru’s example.”

Bheema throws back his head and laughs. “Here me well, Brahmana. Arjuna needs leave from no man, why from no Deva even! No one in heaven or earth can stop my brother. He did not beg your leave; he only honored you as his guru. But I am not Arjuna, I am Bheema. Yes, there was a time when I, too, honored you. Why, I worshipped the ground you walked, because you were like a father to us.

All that is over, Drona. You are not the Acharya who loved us, any more, but Duryodhana’s minion. You are not my guru, but my enemy. I am not Arjuna who is sentimental still. I am Bheema and I kill those who fight for Duryodhana!”

He leaps down from his chariot and, mace in hand, eyes on fire, charges Drona. Losing his nerve, the brahmana leaps out of his ratha and shows a clean pair of heels. Next moment, Bheema is at his chariot and his horses, smashing them down, the sarathy’s scream cut off with a blow that decapitates him. Bheema’s laughter rings across Kurukshetra. But he has no time to waste chasing Drona. The Pandava climbs back into his chariot and going like his father of the air, rides again toward Arjuna.

Bheema’s passage is surprisingly easy. All around him, he sees the corpses with which Satyaki has embellished the field. On he fizzes, until a legion of elephants blocks his path. Bheema is not put out: his eyes shine! He rushes at the beasts and their soldiers. Again, Kurukshetra rings with trumpeting and screams. Soon, like the sun from a bank of clouds, Bheema emerges, triumphant and booms ahead on his quest for his brother.

From a flank, mounted in a fresh chariot, Drona rides at him again. Bheema has no patience for a duel. He casts his mace like a thunderflash, smashing Drona’s chariot to a standstill. Leaping to the ground, the son of the wind runs forward. With unearthly strength, he picks up that chariot and hurls it half a league from him! It shatters where it lands, flinging Drona out. The stunned brahmana climbs into another ratha and, realizing there is no stopping the wind’s son today, rides back to his place beyond the padma vyuha.

On plunges Bheema and those who are foolish enough to cross his path lie dead on Kurukshetra. The remnants of the Kaurava army left by Satyaki make way for him, running as far as they can at the sight of his chariot. Just once, one of Duryodhana’s brothers gathers a force to obstruct his way. As he comes, Bheema hurls a gleaming mace at them, an occult weapon. A thousand men fall dead at its impact and Bheema’s path is clear again. He sears on in Satyaki’s wake.

He erupts out of the padma vyuha and sees a fulvous lion-banner before him, flapping in the breeze, while the chariot that flies it streaks on remorselessly through the suchimukha vyuha, piling the bloody dead in its wake. It is Satyaki decimating Duryodhana's army, flying ever closer to Arjuna. Bheema swirls past the absorbed Yadava and shocked at the Vayuputra's sudden appearance, the Kau-ravas dare not come near him.

On hurtles Bheema and then his eyes light up: ahead of him and not far, he sees another banner waving. He sees a white and gold chariot shining like treasure, yoked to foam-white horses and throwing back his head, Bheema gives the most magnificent roar! Like an earthquake, that joyful sound rocks Kurukshetra. Krishna and Arjuna hear it, the rapt Satyaki hears it; and all of them yell one another's names, back and forth, on top of their voices.

Over the ruins of two vyuhās, that sound carries to Yudhishtira. He jumps up and such a smile breaks out on his careworn face. "Arjuna is alive!" cries Yudhishtira. "Satyaki is alive, Krishna is alive and Bheema has found them! He has always done anything I asked him to, but never before has he made me as happy as he has today. My friends, Yudhishtira is the most fortunate man on earth!"

The Kauravas hear those roars, all over Kurukshetra and know that Arjuna does not hunt Jay-adratha alone any more. Karna hears Bheema's roar and its arrogance infuriates him. He rides to challenge Bheema. Like a sunburst comes Karna, arrows streaming. The son of Surya and the son of Vayu meet in battle; Bheema brushes aside his brother's volleys and casts a silvery mantle of his own over Karna. The Kaurava soldiers, who have heard only of Bheema's prowess at the mace, are agape at his archery. Bheema breaks Karna's bow; unruffled, the Suryaputra snatches up another and fights on.

More than anything else, the cool, mocking smile on Karna's lips enrages Bheema. He tries to outdo himself, to be more of an archer than he really is. His aim falters, as he shoots too quickly; while Karna fights calmly, well within himself, his every arrow sharp and true to its mark. Soon, the difference between the two is plain and who the great bowman is. His touch deft and light, Karna is as quick as thinking. The indulgent smile never leaves his face, but Bheema's turns crimson with effort. His eyes bulge, he growls and curses.

Karna knows how easily he can end this duel. Any time he wants he can break the bow in Bheema's great hands. But then, Karna also knows Bheema is his brother and strange love fills his heart for the wild kshatriya before him. Karna never fights as he can. Instead, he slackens his own archery deceptively

and allows Bheema to break his bow for the second time. Bheema's cry of delight is reward enough; Karna's eyes are filmed with tears.

However, Bheema does not fight a brother, but a hated enemy. He kills two of his horses, wounds his sarathy and Karna himself. A shadow of annoyance crosses Karna's sere face and he leaps into his son Vrishasena's chariot. Bheema's roar echoes there again: he has the better of the lord of Anga and his way to Arjuna is clear once more.

Bheema rides on. But as if he enjoyed the encounter with his uninhibited brother, Karna tilts at him again from a flank. Bheema gives an angry shout, never realizing that for Karna this battle is a chance to be near him, near enough almost to caress his brother. Indeed, Karna wants to leap down from his chariot, run to Bheema and hug him; and to cry, 'I am also Kunti's son. Take me to Yudh-ishtira. I will fight for him from now!'

Bheema thinks Karna's reputation is exaggerated. He yells, "You can't stand before this Bheema, Sutaputra and you brag that you will kill my brother Arjuna?"

Bheema remembers the day of the gambling and begins to fight in anger. Karna finds it less easy to hold him off without hurting him. Bheema carves his chariot again. Duryodhana sees this and sends his brother Dussalan with a fresh chariot for Karna. But even as Karna climbs into it, Bheema takes off Dussalan's head in a roseate burst. Duryodhana roars in sorrow and Bheema kills a hundred Kau-rava soldiers to celebrate.

Duryodhana panics. Trembling, he rides to Drona and cries hotly, "My lord, you swore not a man would enter your padma vyuha. But three kshatriyas are at the point of the suchimukha! Arjuna, Satyaki and Bheema have halved our legions. Our maharathikas who guard Jayadratha are hard-pressed to hold them off. I thought it was easier to imagine the sea dried up, than your vyuha smashed with such contempt!"

Drona has done his best and it has not been enough today. He says sharply, "What has happened can't be undone: better think what to do next."

Frothing, Duryodhana cries, "Jayadratha must not die! See that Arjuna does not reach him, Acharya. I count on you!"

The arrogance of the Kaurava's tone strikes his master like a blow. He was being upbraided like a boy before all the soldiers: that three men had dodged around him, two like cowards. Between clenched teeth Drona hisses at Duryodhana, "All day I have fought like a man half my age and I have kept a

whole army at bay. And if I had not, there wouldn't be three, but three thousand kshatriyas at Jayadratha's throat.

But it seems you don't value what I have done. See to your precious brother-in-law yourself! You swore he would not be harmed. But this is not a game of dice, Duryodhana: this is war and you once cheated your enemies out of everything they had. Today the wager is your brother-in-law's life and the dice are arrows. You have Brahma's armor, go and save Jayadratha yourself."

Duryodhana is too taken aback to reply. He is also afraid Drona will abandon him, if he annoys him any more. He turns his chariot and rides back toward the suchimukha vyuha. There, every moment, Arjuna claws his way nearer Jayadratha.

TWENTY-ONE

KARNA AND BHEEMA

His mind an angry fire, Duryodhana rides away from Drona. He meets two other Pandava warriors who broke into the padma vyuha at Arjuna's chariot-wheels: Yuddhamanyu and Uttamaugas still range the inner petals of the Acharya's lotus. Duryodhana attacks them. He wounds Uttamaugas' horses, but Yuddhamanyu sets on him ferociously and then Uttamaugas, also, from different directions. They smash Duryodhana's chariot-wheels and luckily for the Kaurava, Shalya is at hand to rescue him from the Panchala brothers. Their laughter follows him, like smoking oil in his ears.

Meanwhile, Bheema does his best to slip past Karna and reach Arjuna. It seems the only way past is to kill him. Bheema sees his enemy smile at him. He thinks he must be dreaming, that it is not a mocking smile he sees on Karna's haughty lips. The son of the wind tells himself his mind is playing tricks on him; he must be more tired than he had thought. Arrogant, spiteful Karna could not be smiling at him with such fondness in his eyes!

As the duel progresses, even Bheema has to admire his opponent's virtuosity. Though he would never admit it, it is archery Arjuna would be proud of. Sweat covers Bheema's body; this is harder than he had thought. He grits his teeth and shoots his arrows more quickly still. But his adversary is so calm he might not be fighting at all. Then, Karna shoots the armor off Bheema's chest. The fond smile widens to see the look of dismay on the Pandava's face. With a roar, Bheema breaks Karna's bow again. He strikes him with two arrows that crash through his breastplate; and while Karna stumbles briefly, Bheema breaks his chariot-wheels.

Karna leaves the field in a Kaurava prince's chariot; Bheema surges on toward Arjuna. By Arjuna has been spared having to face Karna so far, because of Bheema's presence nearby. But the Vayuputra does not get far: out flits Karna from the suchimukha again, the cryptic smile still on his face. Cursing loudly, Bheema attacks him. Suddenly, the images of their long exile come steaming back to the Pandava and he decides to kill the sutaputra if he can. In that rush of anger he breaks two bows in Karna's hands, in quick succession and is astonished to see a gleam of approval in his enemy's eyes! Bheema cannot believe this. Beside himself because he thinks Karna is taunting him, he fights with renewed fury.

By now, Karna the kshatriya is roused. Knitting his brow, the lord of Anga draws blood with a clutch of mind-swift arrows that whistle at his antagonist from extraordinary angles. Yet Karna has the disadvantage of knowing this is his brother. He has two battles on his hands: the one against Bheema and the other with himself; while, Bheema just wants to kill an enemy. At being struck, he fights more fiercely, his roars shaking the field.

Bheema's archery is hardly less than Arjuna's now and seeing Karna beaten back, Duryodhana cries to his brother Durjaya, "Fly to Karna's side, or the beast will have his life today!"

Durjaya is one of Duryodhana's bravest brothers and he rides at Bheema at once. The very sight of him is tonic to the Pandava. Bheema gives a shout of joy and strikes Durjaya's head off with a crescent-tipped shaft worthy of Drona. Karna wails. He knows each of Duryodhana's brothers well, has been close to them all. Bheema shatters Karna's chariot once more. Karna leaps out and stands on the ground, battling on, torn between love and rage.

Duryodhana has lost count of his brothers Bheema has killed today. Like a losing gambler, he sends another one against his cousin; now, he sends Durmukha who is one of the finest archers in both armies. But Bheema is no more the student of archery he had been in Drona's asrama: today, he fights for revenge. Nine arrows so quick they are like a single unbroken one greet Durmukha. All nine crash into his chest. They rip through his armor, part flesh, bone and gristle and the Kaurava dies without shooting at the son of the wind. Bheema's ecstatic yell echoes across Kurukshetra.

Guilty, that he may have saved Duryodhana's brothers if it weren't his own brother that faced him, Karna feels faint in his chariot and has to sit abruptly on its floor. The raging Bheema stills shoots at him. He cuts the armor off his body. Karna jumps up again and strikes him with an arrow deep in his shoulder. He aimed at his heart, but turned his hand away at the last moment. Bheema's reply is so savage that Karna has to ride away for a time.

Suicidally emboldened that Bheema has killed so many of them, almost as if now they have as much stake in the next world as this one, five more of Duryodhana's brothers charge the Pandava. Durmarshana rides with these. Bheema grins like a lion seeing a herd of tender deer. In a bloody blur, he kills all five. They die astonished, that the lumbering Bheema is more of an archer than they had dreamt.

Karna flares back into battle. He has decided to face Bheema as just an enemy now: it is his ksha-triya dharma. Another duel begins. As daylight

softens, every moment, Karna and Bheema light up the dharma kshetra with astras.

Karna is at his best; but Bheema matches him shaft for shaft. Both have their armor shot off their backs; both are bloody. Yet again, Bheema strikes Karna deeply in his arm and the panicstricken Duryodhana sends five more of his brothers to rescue his friend. Bheema roaring, Bheema rapturous, Bheema fighting like two Arjunas, shoots them down in a garnet flurry, while Karna howls in shock.

Bheema roars, “Forty-nine, Duryodhana! Send me more.”

Karna fights on. Around the two kshatriyas, soldiers collect to watch them duel. Arjuna, Krishna and Satyaki watch, cheering Bheema loudly. Even they cannot help admiring Karna’s archery; it is so sublime. Of the Kaurava army, Bhoorisravas, Drona, Kripa and Shalya applaud both warriors, regardless. Yuddhamanyu and Uttamaujas are there, too and they shout encouragement only to Bheema.

Trembling in every limb, Duryodhana sends seven more of his brothers to Karna’s side. Nothing would please the Kaurava more than to see Bheema killed. The seven surround Bheema. He laughs uproariously at them, beckoning to them to come closer with his huge hands, as he might little boys. But when the Vayuputra sees the seventh Kaurava who rides against him, his laughter dries up. In grief, mighty Bheema roars, “Ah, Vikarna! Why have you come to me to die?”

On the day of the gambling in Hastinapura, Vikarna was the only Kaurava who spoke for Draupadi. Bheema cries, “I have sworn to kill all hundred of you and I mustn’t break my oath. Oh, I curse this war that you must die with the sinners. Vikarna, forgive me!”

And he strikes Vikarna’s head off. The other six he has already killed and Karna’s roars of outrage rock Kurukshetra. Blind, furious Karna reverts to an old and habitual hatred; he forgets he is fighting his brother. Once more, Bheema the Pandava, Bheema the enemy, stands before him, having killed fifty-six of Duryodhana’s brothers. A gasp goes up from those who watch, because Karna is transformed into another, unearthly archer, for whom the Pandava is no match at all. Quicker than seeing, Karna splits Bheema’s bow, he severs the reins in his sarathy’s hands, he wounds that charioteer with a shaft through his chest. All this happens in a wink and Bheema stands with a bewildered look on his face. He cannot believe this is the same man he sent scuttling from battle, three or four times.

Again, the maddening smile curves Karna's lips. Bheema casts a heavy lance at him. Serenely and as if he has a day to do it, Karna divides that spear along its length, as it flies at him; the halves hum past him harmlessly. Bheema lifts a shield to protect himself; an arrow like a shard of lightning smashes it into dust. Bheema flings a sword at Karna like a knife-thrower; Karna cuts it down easily.

Far from beaten, Bheema leaps out of his chariot. He lays hold of the first thing that comes to hand and hurls it at Karna: pieces of broken chariots, fallen soldiers' swords and shields, rocks. Then he sees the carcasses of elephants he himself killed and Bheema picks these up and casts them at Karna! Still smiling, at times laughing aloud at the Pandava's antics, Karna cuts everything down; he truncates the elephants in the air.

Inexorably, Karna closes on Bheema. Bheema stands before him, chest heaving, uncowed. Karna raises his bow, with an arrow fitted to it, aimed at the Pandava's heart. Just a kshatriya now, his enemy in the eye of his shaft, Karna draws back his bowstring. At the heart of that long moment, he sees Kunti's face before him. He remembers his oath to her that he would not kill any of her sons except Arjuna. Suddenly, he sees not a dangerous enemy whom he has at his mercy, but his brother. Karna stays his hand. Instead, he reaches out and prods Bheema with his bow on his great chest, reviling him.

Bheema stands shaking, helpless and Karna cries, "Pandava, you are a glutton and a fool besides, that you dare challenge me. Go back to Virata's kitchen; you belong there more than on a battlefield. Or go back to the forest and spend your days gathering fruit and roots. Look at you, your face red and helpless as a child! Go home, boy: this is a man's war and no place for you."

From a way off, Krishna sees all this. He knows he must come to Karna's rescue, or how will he spare Bheema's life before all the Kaurava army? The Dark One cries to Arjuna, "Karna has Bheema at his mercy, he taunts him like fire!"

Arjuna swirls around and covers Karna with a scream of *narachas*, which home into Karna's body like cranes into the *krauncha* mountains. Gratefully, that warrior turns away from Bheema; he allows Arjuna to chase him off. Satyaki rides up to Bheema. The Pandava climbs into his chariot and they ride away, Bheema still trembling, humiliated by a brother he does not know. Arjuna pursues Karna briefly, his dark *sarathy* glad he had told Surya's prince who he really was, or Bheema would have lost his life. In rage for Bheema, Arjuna looses an *astra* after Karna. Aswatthama sees the weapon burning across the

field and cuts it down. With a roar, Arjuna turns on his guru's son.

TWENTY-TWO SATYAKI AND BHOORISRAVAS

Satyaki, scourge of the Kaurava army, arrives at the front in blazing style. Dusasana surrounds him with a legion, but Satyaki brushes him aside, killing another thousand men, while siddhas, charanas and pannagas applaud in the sky¹. He bursts through Dusasana's force and rides toward his master.

Krishna says to Arjuna, "Here comes your sishya. He has burned his way through two vyuhas: Satyaki of the incredible exploit!"

Arjuna is not pleased. "I left him to guard Yudhishtira like his life and he has left my brother's side."

"Can't you think why he has come? Yudhishtira must be anxious and has sent him to find us. Whatever the reason, I am glad to see Satyaki and Bheema."

"Look, Krishna!" cries Arjuna. "Bhoorisravas rides at Satyaki and Satyaki is exhausted."

Bhoorisravas reaches Satyaki and Arjuna says, "How quickly the sun sinks and Jayadratha still lives. Bhoorisravas has just begun to fight and he is fresh. Now I have Satyaki to protect; Yudhishtira should never have sent him out so late."

They who still dare give battle to Arjuna; he kills those who come in his way, easily as breathing. Meanwhile, Bhoorisravas cries, "I have waited so long for this moment, Satyaki! You won't escape with your life today."

Satyaki roars back, "You are like an autumn cloud, Bhoorisravas, full of thunder but never bringing rain. Fight me not with threats, but arrows if you dare!"

Vasudeva's father, Soora, had a cousin called Sini, who was a fine kshatriya. When Kamsa was king in Mathura he held a swayamvara for his cousin Devaki. Sini burst into that swayamvara and carried Devaki away for Vasudeva, who loved her. A Kuru king called Somadatta, who had eyes for Devaki himself, challenged Sini. Before all the other kings, Sini defeated Somadatta. Heady with victory, he caught the Kuru by his hair, dragged him down into the mud and holding a sword to his throat, planted a foot on his chest. Somadatta never forgot that humiliation. He performed a tapasya to Siva, for a son who would, one day, avenge the insult. Bhoorisravas was born Somadatta's

son and Satyaki as Sini's grandson.

The Yadava and the Kuru duel. Bhoorisravas is a bhakta and a kshatriya and he has hardly fought today. This was exactly as Drona intended: if Arjuna broke through the two vyuhās, he must face a handful of maharathikas, who had rested all day, before he reached Jayadratha. It was to save Arjuna some of that effort, that Krishna had summoned Satyaki and Bheema.

Bhoorisravas kills Satyaki's horses with an astra that sets them alight, roasting them. As he leaps from his chariot, the Yadava kills the Kuru's horses with four shafts that find their hearts. Bhoorisravas also leaps out of his ratha. Swords out in a flash, in the grip of an older contention than this war, they charge each other. Blade rings against blade, showering sparks over both kshatriyas. They circle one another and thrust out wildly. They hew and parry, they growl, they roar, they weave and dodge. They leap high in the air and strike mighty blows down on each other. With every moment, it is clear that Satyaki tires quickly; inevitably, Bhoorisravas gains the advantage. Satyaki staggers under his blows and has neither the strength nor the speed to answer them any more. It is all the Yadava can do to keep the Kuru from killing him. Still, he does not run, but fights on.

Krishna turns to Arjuna. "Satyaki is so tired he can hardly stand. Bhoorisravas will kill him if you don't intervene."

Even as he speaks, Bhoorisravas fells Satyaki with a tremendous stroke, knocking the Yadava's blade from his hand, sending him sprawling on his back. With a roar, Bhoorisravas is on him, crying, "The moment of revenge is here, Yadava! This is what your grandfather did to my father."

Bhoorisravas seizes Satyaki by his hair, plants a foot squarely on the fallen warrior's chest and roars his triumph; and Satyaki goes limp. Even the Kaurava soldiers cry out in shock at the shaming of a fallen enemy. But, his eyes glinting, Bhoorisravas drags the young Yadava round and round the space where they had fought, roaring, "Today, my father is avenged!"

Krishna cries to Arjuna, "Look what that wretch is doing to my cousin! Satyaki didn't follow you through two armies to be humiliated like this."

Arjuna replies, "Bhoorisravas is honorable. He is only having revenge for what happened to his father. He will not kill Satyaki."

The words hardly leave his mouth and they see Bhoorisravas draw his sword again. They see him raise his arm to hew off Satyaki's head. Arjuna cries, "What shall I do, Krishna?"

“To kill an unconscious enemy isn’t the kshatriya dharma by which we agreed to fight this war,” says the Avatara.

Between the raising of Bhoorisravas’ arm and its fall, Arjuna cuts off that sword-arm with an arrow like lightning. The look on Bhoorisravas’ face is unforgettable. He stares at the blood spouting at his elbow and his severed arm which lies on the ground at his feet, the sword still clutched in its hand. Bhoorisravas whirls around with an agonal cry and sees Arjuna behind him.

“Arjuna!” wails Bhoorisravas. “What have you done? Is this dharma? You have covered yourself in shame, Pandava. You have brought disgrace to the House of Kuru! Your wretched sarathy made you do this, only a Yadava could stoop so low.”

But Arjuna rages back at him, “You dare speak ill of Krishna! Do you think I am heartless that I will let you kill Satyaki when he cannot defend himself? He is not only my friend who risks his life for me, he is my sishya. Bhoorisravas, when Sini shamed him, your father was not in the state in which Satyaki is. I could have had your head instead of your arm and I would not sin.”

Bhoorisravas stands before him, uncowed, blood gushing from his wound. Arjuna rails on, “Dare you speak to me of dharma? You stood by when the six maharathikas shot Abhimanyu down like a dog, when my child stood defenseless before them. Was that the dharma you preach? Or is dharma just for someone else, while you and yours are above it? Did you say a word to your dastardly nephews, when they murdered my son?”

Bhoorisravas has no answer to this. He hangs his head. Next moment, Arjuna is overcome with remorse and cries, “Ah, my lord, how I hate myself that I was born a kshatriya! That I had to do this terrible thing to one of the noblest sons of the House of Kuru. But I curse Duryodhana more than I do myself: all this is his doing.”

Arjuna has tears in his eyes. Now, Bhoorisravas raises his good hand over his head, to acknowledge what the Pandava says. He orders a seat of kusa grass spread for himself on the battlefield beside his chariot. He sits on it in padmasana, the posture of the lotus. Bhoorisravas shuts his eyes, yokes himself in dhyana and prepares to die. The blood flowing from his elbow forms a pool on the field of dharma.

The Kaurava army has gathered around Bhoorisravas, in a hush. Every soldier’s gaze is upon him. They watch the color drain from his face and slowly the pain, as the swell of the atman, his soul, washes over the kshatriya. Just then,

Satyaki stirs from his faint. He seizes up his sword and rushes at Bhoorishravas, who by now is unaware of the world. Kaurava soldiers cry out in horror. Arjuna and Krishna cry at Satyaki to stop. But he is at the motionless Bhoorishravas in a blink. With a roar, Satyaki strikes off the Kuru's head so it flies from his neck in a scarlet eruption.

The Yadava stands panting beside Bhoorishravas' corpse, his eyes aflame, daring anyone to challenge him.

TWENTY-THREE

THE SETTING SUN

Arjuna is shocked by what his sishya does; but this is no time for him to rebuke Satyaki and the Pandava does not say a word. The Kauravas raise accusing voices and Satyaki smolders at them. They cry at him, “Is this dharma that you kill a man who had sat down to die? That you kill him while he sits in dhyana, with his eyes shut?”

Sword in hand, Satyaki roars back at them, “How easy it is to preach dharma to others! But yesterday, when that child said, ‘Come, one by one and fight me’, did you listen to him? When Karna cut Abhimanyu’s bowstring from behind his back that was dharma was it? When you set on him like a pack of dogs, was that dharma? The Kuru Acharya, the Senapati of this great army, was the one who trapped him. He knew only Abhimanyu could enter the chakra vyuha when Arjuna was away. To save his wounded pride, to save face, he murdered a mere boy. I know it was Drona who told Karna the only way Abhimanyu could be subdued: with treachery, from behind his back! When your Sena-pati’s conscience is sold for a title, how dare the rest of you speak of dharma?”

As for my killing Bhoorisravas, I care little what you think of it: I am a kshatriya and I must kill anyone who insults me. When I was past fighting back, he struck me down, seized my hair and dragged me round the field. I would have killed him, anyway, or died trying to. I don’t care what you think, my dharma was to kill Bhoorisravas.”

Suddenly, a disembodied voice, an asariri, speaks out of the sky, “No blame clings to Satyaki. It was written that Bhoorisravas would die by his hand.”

The Kaurava army turns away from that sanguinary place. Satyaki has no chariot to ride in; he stands there with his bloodied sword in his hand. Even after the unearthly voice speaks, Arjuna is not convinced of Satyaki’s innocence. But Jayadratha still lives and every moment the sun plunges down the sky and the world grows dimmer.

Arjuna says, “Krishna, our time is short.”

Krishna flicks his reins over the gandharva horses. Duryodhana, Karna, Vrishasena, Aswatthama, Kripa and their soldiers prepare to stop the charge of the white chariot. Duryodhana cries to Karna, “There is only one task for you

now: keep Arjuna away from Jayadratha. The sun is not far from setting and all of us will be at your side. If you can do this thing, the war is won.”

But also between Karna and Arjuna stands Satyaki, sword in hand, his feet stained with Bhoorisravas’ blood. Karna rides at the Yadava: to distract Arjuna again, to waste more of his precious time; or, perhaps, deep in his heart, Karna does not want his brother to fail his mission. Arjuna cries, “Quick, Krishna! Ride to Satyaki, he stands defenseless before Karna.”

But Krishna does not want to face Karna now. He fears Indra’s shakti that Karna has. He says, “Let Satyaki face Karna. There are others we must pass, before you can keep your vow.”

“But Satyaki has no chariot!”

“Not for long,” replies the Avatara. He raises the Panchajanya to his lips and a clear rishabha rings across Kurukshetra. Hardly has that note died, when they hear a storm of horses’ hooves and no one can be sure if the sound comes from the earth or the sky. In a moment, a marvelous chariot flashes up to Satyaki and he cannot tell whether that ratha came through the Kaurava lines, or flew down from Devaloka. It shines like treasure on Kurukshetra and flies the banner of the golden eagle. Satyaki climbs into Krishna’s chariot, the Jaitra and Daruka’s chariotry excels the Dark One’s.

Satyaki and Karna fight a pitched duel. But Karna’s sarathy is no match for Daruka, who flies here and there, like thoughts, as hard to aim at. The advantage of fighting from Krishna’s chariot, yoked to the foam-born horses Varuna gave the Blue God, tells for the Yadava. Besides, killing Bhoorisravas has invigorated Satyaki. He cripples Karna’s chariot and Duryodhana has to rescue his friend.

The Kauravas must stop Satyaki from gaining Arjuna’s side again; together, those two would make short work of cutting their way through to Jayadratha. Dusasana and some of his brothers surround Satyaki; they are dazzled by Daruka’s skill and overwhelmed by the renewed Yadava’s archery. Satyaki has them at his mercy. But he remembers Bheema’s oath and lets them escape; only hurting them sorely on their way.

In grudging admiration, Aswatthama says to Kritavarman, “If anyone on Kurukshetra is Arjuna’s equal and Krishna’s, it is Satyaki.”

Kritavarman murmurs, “There is no fourth.”

But Karna has swung away from the irrepressible Satyaki and confronts Arjuna. Before they actually fight, Arjuna cries to him, “You slaughtered my son like an animal. You will see me kill your boy Vrishasena!”

Arjuna sails past, always flying nearer Jayadratha, whom he now sees clearly through the slender suchimukha. Every moment the sun sinks lower, the shadows grow longer. Duryodhana rides up to Karna and cries, "You must hold him up, Karna! The sun has almost set. Just a while and he will not reach Jayadratha."

Arjuna sees the sun turn the color of blood and its lower rim touch the horizon. Krishna takes the white chariot deeper into the suchimukha, nearer and nearer the needle's eye. Five maharathikas led by Karna ride between Arjuna and Jayadratha. Satyaki and Bheema are at Arjuna's side now, holding off some of the Kaurava warriors. Inexorably, they forge closer, like two tigers hunting a ruru deer, or two hawks swooping down on a shred of flesh and, nothing else for it, Jayadratha raises his bow and fights, at least to keep his terror at bay.

Between them, battling as if for their own lives, Satyaki and Bheema hold up four of the kshatriyas who protect Jayadratha. But Karna looms before Arjuna, like a hill he must cross in a few moments. An ineffable duel breaks out between them. The astras they shoot at each other light up Kurukshetra brighter than the sun, which falls away like Arjuna's very life. Half the saffron orb is already below the horizon and Karna still bars Arjuna's way with a hindrance of arrows.

Krishna cries to Arjuna, "We cannot reach him before the sun sets. Night is about to fall, be ready with the Paasupata. Trust me now. When I tell you, kill Jayadratha!"

In faith, Arjuna invokes that weapon with its mantra, though he does not know what Krishna means. A moment later, darkness falls on Kurukshetra and a shout goes up from the Kaurava soldiers. Duryodhana's roar rings above all the rest. "The sun has set!"

Karna lowers his bow. Arjuna shivers with soft fear in his chariot. He still waits breathlessly, the Paasupata ready in his hand. Jayadratha's cry of relief echoes there, "The sun has set!"

All the fighting stops. The soldiers raise their eyes to the sky where a thousand stars glimmer down at them in the suddenly fallen night. Jayadratha lifts his head to gaze at the sky. As in a dream, Arjuna hears Krishna hiss at him, "Quick! Kill him now. The sun hasn't set, I have hidden it for a moment."

There is no time for doubt. In the dream, past Karna's chariot, Arjuna sees Jayadratha's bare neck and shoots the Paasupata at that throat. Just before the astra flames out, Krishna says, "His head mustn't fall on the earth. Jayadratha's

father sits in sandhya vandana near Samantapanchaka. Let his son's head fall in his lap!"

Jayadratha's roar shatters the silence as Siva's astra takes off his head like a bud from a flowering-tree. As the others spin round, they see a stream of arrows, silvery as moonlight, pluck up that head even as it falls, neatly severed from its neck. They see the spectral shafts carry Jayadratha's head high above the battlefield and beyond its perimeter. A million voices roar, "Arjuna has broken his vow. He killed Jayadratha after the sun had set!"

Arjuna has no answer to this; but then, a divine Chakra glides majestically away from the last sliver of the setting sun. Night and its stars vanish and Kurukshetra is bathed in ruddy light again, the color of Jayadratha's blood. Krishna says to Arjuna, "There was no other way. I hid the sun with the Sudarshana."

Arjuna's face is wreathed in a smile. Bheema's celebrant roars rock Kurukshetra and Satyaki roars with him. Duryodhana and his army stand rooted, hardly believing what their eyes have seen.

TWENTY-FOUR

THE WAR AT NIGHT

Arjuna chants the mantra to withdraw the Paasupatastra. From afar, the silver shaft flies back into the Pandava's quiver. There it vanishes and a breeze laden with the scents of a thousand different flowers blows across Kurukshetra. His eyes alight, because he knew how close they had come to failure, Krishna embraces Arjuna. The Kauravas troop numbly away from the place where Arjuna kept his vow, Duryodhana sobbing in rage.

Far away, across the field, Yudhishtira hears Bheema's roar echoing, repeatedly and he cries, "It's Bheema roaring in joy. Jayadratha is dead!"

As if to confirm this, golden blasts from the Devadatta and the Panchajanya are borne to them on the scented breeze. Yudhishtira is beside himself. Over and over, he cries, "Jayadratha is dead! Arjuna has killed Jayadratha!"

Meanwhile, Arjuna kneels before Krishna. The Pandava says, "This is your doing. Without you, Jayadratha would be alive and I would be preparing to kill myself. Krishna, without you I would never have crossed this sea of enemies and kept my word to my child. Now I see what your grace is; now I believe Yudhishtira will rule the world again. This is your doing, Lord, all of it!"

Krishna smiles. How different this Arjuna was from the kshatriya who was so full of doubt before the war began. Krishna says, "Look around Kurukshetra. Between Satyaki and you, you have razed seven aksauhinis; and the Kauravas were glad to sacrifice them, as long as Jayadratha lived and Arjuna died. How they will rue their losses now. I think our Satyaki has killed more men than you have today."

The wind in their faces, they ride back through the ruins of the Kaurava army. With darkness, the first hyenas and jackals are already on the prowl among the dead. As they go, Arjuna asks, "Why did I have to carry Jayadratha's head into his father's lap? Krishna, why did I have to kill him with the Paasupatastra?"

"Jayadratha was born after his father Brihatkshatra performed a tapasya. And when his son was born, he asked for a boon that he could be killed only by the greatest kshatriya on earth and with the greatest of all astras! You did not know this, but that is why you had to have the Paasupata. Brihatkshatra's tapasya was such that he could ask for another boon. And he asked that the man

who caused his son's head to fall on the earth would have his own head burst apart."

Arjuna stares at his sarathy and Krishna nods in reply to his unspoken question. Earlier that evening, as the sun was setting, Brihatkshatra sat in dhyana at Samantapanchaka, not far from Kurukshetra. He sat in padmasana, his eyes shut, his breath stilled, lost in himself. But he was roiled by nightmarish anxiety this evening. Suddenly, some silver arrows flew out of the sky and dropped their grisly load in the meditating king's lap. He sprang up with a cry and his son's staring head fell on to the ground. Brihatkshatra had no time even to scream and his own head exploded.

Through the remains of the Kaurava army, Arjuna, Bheema and Satyaki ride back to Yudhishtira. He gives such a shout when he sees them. He runs to Arjuna, to embrace him fervently, while tears course down his face.

"I thank God for this! I thank God a thousand times that you are alive, Arjuna. And you, Krishna and my Bheema and you, heroic Satyaki." One by one, he hugs the others as well. Then, taking Krishna's hand, Yudhishtira cries, "My Lord, by your grace my brother has prevailed today. You decided Arjuna would keep his oath and then no power on earth could stop him!" And he sobs like a child before the Dark One.

A smiling Krishna says, "There you are mistaken: Jayadratha died because your eyes blazed in rage yesterday! The wrath of a good man, a serene man not easily moved to anger, is more potent than any other force on earth. And, also," he puts an arm around Arjuna, "this brother of yours is the greatest archer in the world."

Across Kurukshetra, in the Kaurava camp cloaked in gloom, Duryodhana sits alone in his tent. Today, he also realizes the truth of what Bheeshma and Drona told him, so often: that no one, not Drona, not Aswatthama, not even Karna, was Arjuna's equal in battle. By himself, the Pandava had come through three vyuhas and he had killed Jayadratha. Now Bheeshma's warnings and Krishna's in Hastinapura, his uncle Vidura's sage warnings, all return to Duryodhana in new resonance; as if only now he hears them clearly and understands what they tried to tell him. Duryodhana sits sobbing bitterly.

But the war is not over and not all his heroes are slain. Drona still lives and no one has really mastered the Acharya yet. Wearily, Duryodhana rises and goes to his guru's tent. Drona is as calm as he was yesterday. Duryodhana walks in. He takes Drona's hands and says, "Look what Arjuna has done to our army. So many kshatriyas have died for me. Bheeshma lies dying on his bed of arrows;

and today, ah, today has been the most dreadful day. Satyaki and Arjuna have destroyed seven aksauhinis. Seven legions razed by two men!

All these kings came to fight for me and now they are dead and I am still alive. I am like a coward, Drona! A man who cannot fight for himself. And look how cruel fate leaves me alive to see my precious friends slain. Each one gave his life for me.” His voice is a whisper. “They paid for my sins, for my arrogance and my stubbornness. They paid with their lives. Not a hundred Aswamedhas can wash my sins from me. How will I face my sister Dussala? I swore to her husband he wouldn’t be harmed. Yesterday I was so confident that no man could break through the whole Kuru army and strike at the eye of the needle. Now not only Jayadratha but Jalasandha, Srutayus, Achutayus, Srutayudha, all once invincible, are dead. Sudakshina is dead, my lord, Vinda and Anuvinda, the wild and brave Alambusa. And fifty-six of my brothers.”

As he counts his dead, his tears stop flowing. Instead, his eyes turn red again. Duryodhana says, “I caused all their deaths and I have nothing left to live for. But I will avenge my friends before I die; I will kill all five Pandavas. I will kill every Panchala, or die trying. How else can I pacify the spirits of my dead? With his friends gone, Duryodhana’s place is not in this world any more, but in Devaloka with those who gave their lives for him. Acharya, I will not rest until I have avenged Jayadratha, Bhoorisravas and the rest, who were killed like animals on a hunt. Why should I wait for tomorrow? Even now, by darkness, I will ride for revenge!”

Drona is moved to see Duryodhana like that. He rises and says, “I always told you Arjuna is invincible, but there is no cure for that. I swear to you, Duryodhana, I will take such battle to the enemy, as they have not tasted yet. I will not take off this armor until all your enemies are dead or I myself am killed. Do not grieve, my prince, Drona will fight for you until no breath remains in his body. Aswatthama will fight beside me. Yes, let us not wait to begin our revenge, but go out straightaway. We will fight under the moon and the stars!”

Grimly, the two of them emerge from the brahmana’s tent. Drona goes to call his legions out again and Duryodhana to find Karna. Soon, the two friends stand at the edge of Kurukshetra, gazing across the starlit ruin of their army.

Duryodhana breathes, “Look at what Arjuna and Satyaki did to our army: more than half our men are dead. The earth drinks their blood, scavengers feast on their flesh. Look where Jayadratha’s headless body lies, with hyenas tearing at him. Karna, you know Arjuna is the Acharya’s favorite sishya; he loves Arjuna more than he does Aswatthama. I am convinced Drona let Arjuna into

the padma vyuha; he could never have broken in otherwise. The brahmana swore to Jayadratha that he would protect him and instead he let the Pandava in like a leopard into a calf-pen. If only I had the sense to see what would happen, I would have sent Jayadratha back to his kingdom; and now we would be rejoicing that Arjuna had killed himself, instead of this terrible grief!

It is not only Jayadratha who is dead. Drona let Satyaki and Bheema in after Arjuna and thousands of our men lie still forever under the stars. Look at the arrows that protrude, ghastly, from their corpses: every shaft bears either Arjuna, Bheema or Satyaki's name. And do you know how many brothers I have lost today? That beast has killed fifty-six of Dhritarashtra's sons!"

A sob rends him. Karna says, "Grief clouds your judgement, Duryodhana; you must not even think this of Drona. I have watched him: he does everything he can for you. At his age, it is a miracle he fights like this. You must be grateful to him, not suspicious. Arjuna's chariot is yoked to gandharva horses, Krishna is his sarathy. Tell me, who can stop him, when he comes like the wind? Arjuna did not fight Drona honorably. He dodged past him and the Acharya could do nothing. Arjuna cried, 'You are not my enemy, but my guru!' and flew by.

It isn't only at Drona that you can point a finger. I was there and you yourself, Duryodhana. Could we stop Arjuna? It was fate, my friend and she is more powerful than all the armies of the earth. We can only do the best we can. The rest is in fate's hands and, despite everything we do, fate has her way with us."

Karna puts an arm around Duryodhana. "Come, let us go out and fight. That is all that matters: that we fight side by side, for each other! That, not even fate can take away from us. Look at all the kshatriyas who have died for you, Duryodhana. What more precious gift is there? How many men are there in this world for whom so many others will give their very lives? The armies are out again. We will fight as never before, for the sakes of those who lie dead for us on Kurukshetra. Beyond that, whether we will win or lose this war is not for us to decide."

Even as they speak, conches sound across the dark field and Drona streams into battle with his legions. Like a ghostly Deva, swathed in starlight, the brahmana rides at the head of his legions. And now he is irresistible. Weapons clash across the field and sound like a burning forest of bamboo upon a mountain. Duryodhana joins his army, with Karna just behind him. The Kaurava fights in cold rage; his arrows are a river of death under the stars. Before the Pandava frontlines can adjust to the unaccustomed battle by night, Duryodhana

has killed a thousand men. He is like an ancient Asura come to hunt by darkness.

The Pandava soldiers run from Duryodhana, any way they can. But from behind their melting lines rides another king as bright and noble as his enemy is fell and heartless. With Bheema at his side, Yudhishtira rides to face his cousin. As soon as Duryodhana sees the eldest Pandava, he plunges at him and the two of them, for whom all this war is being fought, duel. Their arrows are pale clouds scudding low in a high wind. At times, they loose shaktis, or the rare astra at each other and these light up the field of death in brief splendor.

Frequently, real clouds pass over the stars and the darkness of the cold night is complete. At these times, no warrior could be certain at whom he shot his arrows, though roars and screams still ring out, in evil bedlam. Drona is anxious for Duryodhana; any chance arrow could kill him in the night. Just then, Duryodhana pierces Yudhishtira's sarathy with a smoking shakti and as the man drops his reins, it seems the Kaurava has his cousin at his mercy. But Yudhishtira replies, quick as life, with two smoking shafts that flame into Duryodhana's chest, knock him down on his chariot-floor and would have killed him except for Brahma's golden armor.

Drona rides between Yudhishtira and Duryodhana, drawing a magic curtain of arrows between them. Yudhishtira's sarathy recovers. Some other Pandava warriors ride up to their king's side and the duel ends. The fighting spreads out again. But it seems Drona can see as clearly by starlight as by the sun. His aim is unerring, his every arrow deadly. Once the two armies flow into each other, it is hard for the kshatriyas to fight with any ease. They can never be sure if their shafts and swords find enemies, or their own men.

The war by night wears a sinister face. Somehow, the battle by daylight, brutal as it is, is not remotely as macabre a ritual as fighting under the stars. The very earth takes on an eerie aspect, as if demons are about, invisibly, partaking in the offerings of life and blood. The darkness of night seems to illumine the deeper significance of this war: that it is a timeless contention between dharma and adharma, good and evil. As if these revelations of the soul's dark and light are intolerable to the common soldier, terror stalks Kurukshetra as never before: terror woven into the screams of the dying and the dismal howling of the jackal-packs.

But the darkness is no obstacle to one that prefers to fight close to his enemies, hand to hand, smashing them down with his mace. For the Pandavas, Bheema is as devastating as Drona is for the Kauravas. It seems that Bheema, too, has cat's eyes, as he hunts Dhritarashtra's sons in the dark. He picks them

out unerringly and, riding at each one, kills them with his mace, or his bare hands, even; rending some limb from limb, covering himself with blood that glimmers under the stars, so he is a scarlet spirit ranging the field.

Yet another warrior is even more at home in the darkness and entirely in his element. Ghatotkacha patrols the night with a legion of rakshasas. For them darkness is their daylight and their strength at this hour is ten times what it is by day. Their eyes like torches on Kurukshetra, their weird cries chilling their enemies' blood, they sweep at the Kaurava army in a wave of dread.

There is a king that fights for the Kauravas, who has lost two sons on Kurukshetra: Somadatta, the father of Sala and Bhoorisravas. He rounds on Satyaki in the night, "Kshatriya! How could you kill my son when he sat in dhyana?"

Satyaki roars back, "And now I will kill you!"

The Yadava matches his words with a brace of fiery arrows, lighting up the dark. Duryodhana flits to Somadatta's side; but Dhrishtadyumna materializes at Satyaki's and holds off the Kaurava prince. Somadatta is hardly a match for Satyaki and the Yadava cracks his bow and fells him with another humming shaft. The unconscious king is borne off the field. Aswatthama rides up to confront Saty-aki, who is still tired after his long day. Aswatthama seems to have the better of their encounter, when, with a heart-stopping cry, Ghatotkacha erupts on him from the night!

Aswatthama whirls round to meet Bheema's son with a lucent volley, turning night into day. Ghatotkacha uses maya against Drona's son; he vanishes and reappears on the other side of Aswatthama's chariot. Ghatotkacha fights with sorcery: he creates bizarre hallucinations out of the black air and the Kaurava soldiers run screaming from them. But Aswatthama is unmoved. He vaporizes the demoniacal visions with an agneyastra, which lustrates the field like a small sun. Aswatthama strikes Ghatot-kacha with some light-swift archery.

Roaring in pain, the rakshasa casts a phosphorescent chakra at him, but the brahmana's son smashes it in flight. Ghatotkacha has a son himself, who attacks Aswatthama from the air with a barrage of occult weapons. Aswatthama turns up at the young rakshasa and brings him down like a bird out of the sky. Ghatotkacha's roar shakes Kurukshetra.

For the first time, the two armies hear him speak in a human tongue. He cries, "Brahmana, you won't escape with your life tonight!"

Ghatotkacha creates a vast illusion. Aswatthama finds himself in the heart

of a mythic forest that teems with all kinds of predators: lions, tigers and baleful incubi; every one of these stalks Drona's son, as in the most terrifying nightmare. The hallucination is like a trial the soul passes through on its way to moksha. But Aswatthama, master of weapons, master of himself, is warrior enough and yogin enough not to be perturbed. Serenely, he invokes the proper astra and dispels the illusion.

Ghatotkacha flies up into the sky and now he fights like any other kshatriya, with bow and arrows. He covers Aswatthama's chariot in a hail of firestones. An anxious Duryodhana rides to his son's side. All round them Ghatotkacha's rakshasas are at their horrible sacrifice: thousands of petrified Kaurava soldiers their offering. Their naked bodies glistening in blood, the jungle demons are on the soft rampage.

Duryodhana cries to Aswatthama, "Who can stand against the rakshasas by night?"

Aswatthama actually smiles at his king, while arrows stream from his glowing bow. He says, "Leave them to me, my lord and their master as well."

With a shaft like Yama's danda, Drona's son fells Ghatotkacha himself. Panic among the other rakshasas; they rush to their fallen friend to revive him. Aswatthama kills three of them as they go. Some of his anxiety allayed, Duryodhana rides away to find Shakuni. He persuades that sorcerer to attack the Pandavas, at this hour that suits him well.

A roar goes up from the Pandava soldiers, "Aswatthama has killed Ghatotkacha!"

Some kings who fight for Yudhishtira are so dismayed they leave the field. But when Bheema hears that cry, he falls on the enemy with renewed ferocity, killing three thousand. Until ten of Duryodhana's brothers ring him round, determined they will finish him, before they meet their brothers' fate. But they could not have chosen a worse time for their bravado. Bheema butchers them as if they were children before him.

When the last of the ten has his skull smashed by the Pandava's mace, another shout rings out on Kurukshetra, "Ghatotkacha isn't dead, he only fainted!"

TWENTY-FIVE

KARNA, KRIPA AND ASWATTHAMA

Aswatthama blazes like Rudra in the night and no one can contain him. He consumes columns of the Pandava army with his astras; and when he shoots Ghatotkacha unconscious, Yudhishtira's army runs from him in terror. As Aswatthama swirls forward, irresistibly, Drupada's splendid sons appear out of the darkness in his way. But Drona's son is master, tonight and he engages all the Panchala princes, at once and kills those that dare stand before him for too long. Seeing his sons die, Drupada comes roaring into the fray.

Meanwhile, Somadatta's father Baahlika, the very oldest kshatriya to fight the great war, straddles Kurukshetra like a man half his age. Until he meets Bheema in the night. Many Pandava soldiers, who fought Baahlika as if he was too old to fight in earnest, have lost their lives tonight. Bheema makes no such mistake. He hurls his mace at the ancient and Baahlika falls, his head split open, his spirit escaped. Baahlika was even older than Bheeshma and a lament goes up at his fall. By the light of astras and the rushlights that some soldiers have lit, ten more of Dhritarashtra's sons surround Bheema. The son of the wind fulfils another tenth part of his vow. Shakuni arrives with his legion and Bheema welcomes him by dispatching some Gandhara princes, Shakuni's brothers.

There is another Pandava who fights as he has never done before: Yudhishtira burns the enemy like legions of dry grass. Drona rides at him. Kurukshetra is lit up, as the astras ruled by Varuna, Yama, Agni, Tvashtar and Savita flare at the Pandava. But Dharma's son, the serene one, cuts them down even as his brother Arjuna might.

With Arjuna resting away from the field, Drona sees this as his best chance to take Yudhishtira. When the Acharya's lesser astras prove ineffectual, Drona intones the mantra for the brahmastra. Yudhishtira hears the arcane chant across the darkness and at once, he summons the same weapon. When brahmastra and brahmastra spume at each other and lock on high, it seems the night has ended abruptly. The Pandava army roars its delight to see Yudhishtira match Drona so wonderfully. The Acharya has no answer to the Pandava king's valor. He rides away from his sishya and the hapless army feels his wrath.

Thousands perish in the dark: their lives put out with arrows they never see from Drona's bow. Then, from two sides, two Devaputras ride to take up their guru's challenge. Bheema comes from the west of the battle, where he has been

annihilating the enemy. Vayu's son now rides with his bow in his hand, covering his master's chariot in silver fire. From the south, in a ratha yoked to steeds white as milk, the moon, or the kunda flower, comes a greater archer than any other. A rested Arjuna rides into battle again, like Death himself. Drona shrinks before the combined assault and the Kaurava soldiers, sleepless and exhausted, their morale at its lowest ebb, run from the brothers like a herd of deer from two tigers.

But Bheema and Arjuna kill thousands in the dark and it seems the war will end this very night. Duryodhana rides to Karna at the edge of the field and cries, "The river of death breaks its banks! You must stop them, Karna, you are my only hope."

Karna says, "I still have Indra's Shakti. Arjuna will die by his father's weapon; and when he dies, the rest will be easy to kill. I ride to bring you victory, Duryodhana. I will kill all the Pandavas for you. I will kill the Panchalas, too and lay the world at your feet!"

Kripa is beside them and the old warrior begins to laugh. Karna whirls round and Kripa says, "Such fine words, Karna! It is a pity that fine words don't win wars, or Duryodhana would already be emperor of Bharatavarsha: for there is no one to match his friend Karna at bragging. You say that you will kill all the Pandavas and the Panchalas? Though they have Krishna with them! But we saw how you ran when you met just Arjuna by himself outside Virata. And today you could not stop him from killing Jayadratha. They say brahmanas make fine speeches and kshatriyas are men of deeds. But Karna is a master of building palaces in the air! I wish you fought as well as you boast."

He laughs again. Red-eyed Karna cries, "I will show you tonight that Karna is not just a braggart. Duryodhana is the only one who loves me and I will lay the world at his feet!"

Kripa scoffs, "You are not master of your own mouth, Karna, then how will you master Arjuna? Wars are not won with boasts; in a few days Yudhishtira will sit upon the throne of the world. Krishna is with the Pandavas, they cannot be defeated."

Karna growls, "I don't doubt the Pandavas are great adversaries. Yudhishtira is the image of dharma and Arjuna is a brilliant archer. What is more, so far fate has been with them. But Arjuna is not immortal. Krishna avoided me today. He knows I have Indra's Shakti and I can kill Arjuna with it!"

Kripa only laughs again. Karna draws his sword and snarls, "Another word

and I will cut your tongue out, Brahmana!”

He actually rushes at Kripa; Aswatthama comes between them, his sword drawn too. “I will kill you for this, Karna!”

Then Duryodhana is among them, pulling Aswatthama away. Karna growls, “Let him go, Duryodhana. He always taunts me and I will kill him first and then the Pandavas.”

Duryodhana cries, “We have an enemy to face! Are we going to help them by killing each other?”

Kripa murmurs, “You are right. Let Arjuna quell this fool’s arrogance.”

Duryodhana says, “Aswatthama, this is no time to fall out among ourselves. Already, the enemy has the advantage. Countless men have died for us: we owe it to our dead to turn defeat into victory. I beg you, save your anger for the Pandavas. Karna is dear to me and he fights our cause.”

Aswatthama lowers his sword. Without another word, Karna mounts his chariot and rides into battle.

TWENTY-SIX

AWESOME KARNA

Karna burns like Agni Deva in the night. At first, when they see him ride at them alone, the exuberant Pandava soldiers rush at him. But he is dread incarnate on Kurukshetra and as swiftly as they came they run from him, when he burns up a legion in moments. No kshatriya dares stand against him and Arjuna rides at him.

A radiant duel breaks out. The armies stand transfixed by the spectacle; it seems two Gods duelled. They fight as if it is daylight and the sun risen on the world: their aim is so true, their archery so effortless. Then, Arjuna strains himself briefly, kills Karna's sarathy and horses and breaks his bow. Karna leaps out and finds the nearest Kaurava chariot to escape in: Kripa's!

The Kaurava army runs blindly when Karna loses his chariot. Arjuna is at them in the night. Roaring, Duryodhana charges him. Kripa cries to Aswatthama, "The king rides at Arjuna. Stop him!"

Quick as time, Aswatthama cuts off Duryodhana. "My lord! Am I dead that you must go to fight Arjuna? It is dark, Duryodhana. I beg you, watch the battle from behind our lines. You are our king, you mustn't expose yourself like this."

Duryodhana replies, "It seems I must fight myself, since your father and you are so full of love for the Pandavas! Drona lets our enemies through our lines, because they are his favorite sishyas. And of your valor, I have hardly seen a glimmer. Is it to please Yudhishtira that you stay your hand, or to win Draupadi's favor? All those that were loyal to me have already lost their lives."

Aswatthama remains calm. He says, "It is true we love the Pandavas. We love you also, or we would not be here at all; and when we fight, we leave our affections off the field. But you have a suspicious nature: whenever we lose a day, you turn accusingly on us. Calm yourself, Duryodhana; Drona and I, Kripa, Karna, Shalya and Kritavarman are all here with you and we shall prevail. Don't doubt me, I swear I will fight for you until there is no breath left in this body."

Duryodhana cries, "Then ride at them, Aswatthama! Show me your courage tonight."

Aswatthama sweeps at the Pandava army like a natural calamity¹. They run from him any way they can, but he consumes them with many flames by starlight. Suddenly, another kshatriya looms out of the night to challenge him.

Through the panicstricken Pandava soldiers, Dhrishtadyumna flies at him.

The fire-prince, whose sons Aswatthama killed today, cries, “It is easy to kill young boys, who are not your equals. Come, coward, try me!”

The hatred between the two is as deep as their fathers’ is. Aswatthama is frantic to kill Dhrishtadyumna: he knows he can save Drona’s life if he does. He roars back, “The Panchala weaklings are mine to kill! Stand and fight, if you dare and I will send you after your sons to Yama.”

They battle with arrows and words sharper than arrows. But the moment belongs to Aswatthama. He cracks Dhrishtadyumna’s bow, cuts down his horses and kills the soldiers who guard his back. The Senapati of the Pandava army flees in another chariot, while the Kaurava army breaks into wild cheers. It seems the night belongs to Drona’s son; he is tameless under the stars.

Meanwhile, Duryodhana has not left the field: he seeks Yudhishtira out, roaring his name in the dark. But when he nears the eldest Pandava, Bheema challenges him. Anxious for the Kaurava’s safety, Drona, Aswatthama and some others fly to his side; while, on the other part, all the Pandavas appear around Bheema. Field and sky are lit by astras.

Satyaki, who ranges Kurukshetra again, cries to his sarathy, “Ride at Somadatta, I will kill him tonight!”

Somadatta roars to see Satyaki again. He would avenge himself on the Yadava, not just for the old humiliation by his grandfather, but now, more, for the death of Bhoorisravas. Satyaki knows he must kill this Kuru, or he will hunt him down some day. They fight without a word, silent as the night beyond, each knowing this duel is for his life. Satyaki has time on his side and presses Somadatta hard, until he saps the older man’s strength. Panting, Somadatta fights on, but finds it harder and harder. Somadatta’s vision grows blurred; resignation comes over his sad heart. Then, Satyaki finds that heart with an arrow that steals past the old man’s defenses. Somadatta falls with a roar, dead.

Ten Kaurava warriors converge on Satyaki, Drona among them. Yudhishtira rides at Drona. The brahmana turns, growling, on the Pandava king. Around them, the general carnage continues and the screams of the dying meld with the howling of the jackal-packs. Kurukshetra is an immense slaughterhouse. It seems the earth has plunged deep into hell. And, indeed, this war marks the ending of an age. The dwapara yuga sets with the war on Kurukshetra and the kali yuga rises already on time’s horizon: monstrous and malignant, eager to be loosed upon the earth. But Krishna is still in the world and as long as he is, the

sinister kali dare not arrive.

The warriors of the two armies are hardly aware of the profound transformation that is afoot. They do not realize why the denizens of night, the jackals, wolves, wild-dogs, hyenas and pisachas, too, are abroad in such numbers. Butchering one another, the kshatriyas are too absorbed in the night's bloody ritual, to notice the macabre Spirit of the kali yuga that is almost upon them; or that their own dominion over the earth nears its end. They have no sense of the distant consequences of the massacre on Kurukshetra. The moment absorbs them completely, the mindless sacrifice of the night.

Under the sorrowing stars, no bond is sacred. Guru and shishya attack each other. Yudhishtira fells Drona in the dark; the master jumps up again and looses a keening vayavyastra at his student. Just in time, the Pandava cuts down the tempestuous weapon with a vayavya of his own.

Krishna rides up anxiously to Yudhishtira and cries, "Why do you face the Acharya so often? He is dangerous. Dhrishtadyumna is the one for Drona, leave the brahmana to him. A king should fight a king. Look where Bheema battles Duryodhana. Go and join him, that is where you should be."

The darkness on Kurukshetra is a night of the soul. That field is swathed in such terror, in such a blindness of the spirit, that frequently soldiers from the same side kill each other, mistaking one another for the enemy. The torches are few and far between and far from adequate to light up a war as great as this one. Much of the fighting is done with the loud yelling of names and armies to distinguish comrade from foe in the pitched night. Seeing how their soldiers panic in the dark and kill each other in the fearful confusion, Duryodhana and Drona confer. They have lost so many men today that they cannot hope to win the war by superior numbers any more. The Pandavas may well have more men left alive.

Duryodhana roars to his legions, "Put down your weapons! You are killing our own soldiers. Put down your weapons and every man light a torch for the maharathikas to fight by."

The Kaurava soldiers gladly obey their king. At the edge of the field, rushlights and brands are lit and passed on, hand to hand, until every tenth man holds a flame over his head. On the other side, the exhausted Pandava soldiers follow their enemies' example and soon Kurukshetra is wonderfully lit up with thousands and thousands of flaming torches: like some unimaginable yagnashala for the huge midnight sacrifice. The fighting begins again, but now only chariot-mounted kshatriyas battle, while footsoldiers light up the darkness so they can

see their antagonists clearly.

A hundred duels flare up by marvelous torchlight and the dharma kshetra is such a spectacle!² Swords, red with blood, make brilliant arcs. Duryodhana cries to his warriors, “Drona will consume the enemy and no one but Dhrishtadyumna can stop him. Kritavarman, you stay close beside the Acharya on his right and you, O Shalya, guard his left side. At any cost, Drona must not face Dhrishtadyumna alone. The rest you leave to him!”

Satyaki seems to have found second wind and fights as if he has begun a new day. A king called Bhoori rashly challenges the Yadava and finds immediate death. Aswatthama burns like a thousand torches himself. Once more, he strikes Ghatotkacha senseless in his chariot. Duryodhana and Bheema duel briefly. Bheema smashes the bow in his cousin’s hands and Duryodhana’s sarathy wisely rides away from that most dangerous enemy.

Sahadeva rides against Karna and fights lustroously; but Karna is a warrior of another order. The encounter doesn’t last long, before he kills Sahadeva’s horses and snaps his bow. Seizing up a sword, Sahadeva leaps from his useless chariot. But even as he runs at Karna, that grand marksman smashes the blade in the Pandava’s hand. Sahadeva wields his mace, only to have it struck into dust. Thinking his death has arrived, Madri’s son wrenches his chariot-wheel free and runs at his sneering enemy. Karna strikes the spokes from the wheel with five amazing arrows; he breaks its rim with a sixth. Sahadeva stands panting and helpless, not ten feet from Karna. Determined to die unbowed, the youngest Pandava stands with his handsome head thrown back, his eyes raking his conqueror.

Karna laughs. Slowly, he brings his chariot nearer the trembling prince. He prods his young antagonist with the tip of his bow. Grinning, he says, “You mustn’t fight your betters, boy. Look there, at your brother Arjuna. Now, he is a kshatriya; go and hide behind him, little one, or else go home.”

With a last mocking laugh and such an inscrutable look in his eyes, Karna rides off leaving Sahadeva dazed that this enemy had spared his life. Shaking his head, he walks away toward the nearby Panchala soldiers, who have witnessed the miracle.

All around, duels rage. Shalya overcomes Virata, Arjuna a king called Ala and Acharya Kripa puts Shikhandi to flight. These are honorable contentions and a helpless enemy is never slain. At midnight, by the wonderful sea of torches, the war puts on a less bestial face. Nakula and Shakuni meet and the Pandava allows the treacherous Gandhara no chance to use any sorcery against him. He

cuts down Shakuni's banner and strikes him down to his chariot-floor.

Dhrishtadyumna finds Drona by torchlight. A brief encounter sparks up between them, but, quickly, Shalya and Kritavarman intervene. Infected by their kshatriyas' valor, the common soldiers of both armies begin to fight again: as if war is an irresistible temptation and the brush with death too sweet to stay away from. Karna has waited just for this; now he can kill a thousand men. He is terrible past describing at the midnight hour. He is a black sun on Kurukshetra, a hungry maw to Yama's realm.

For the Pandavas there is a kshatriya as glorious as Karna is. Wherever he goes, all heads turn to watch him. Satyaki the Yadava is so handsome he makes even his enemies wish they were women! There are those who die by his arrows, crying out his name, rapturous that he and no other has killed them. As if drawn together by fate, this night, Karna and Satyaki come face to face on Kurukshetra.

They do not fight long with common shafts. Astras of fire, water, wind and air light up the sky into which a moon rises shyly now, as if in fear of the war below. Those who die by darkness are spirited away to different worlds than those who find their end under the sun. It is inauspicious to die at night. But who thinks of such things, while the war rages?

Karna hears loud screaming among his legions, he hears the thunder of the Gandiva. Leaving Satyaki in the midst of their duel, Karna seeks out Duryodhana. He says to the Kaurava, "Do you hear the song of the Gandiva? Do you hear our men scream? I cannot ride against Arjuna yet. I have Satyaki to kill first, the sishya before the guru. Hold the Pandava up somehow, until I rid us of the Yadava. Then Arjuna will find death by his father's Shakti and, Duryodhana, the world will be yours."

Duryodhana and Shakuni ride toward Arjuna and Karna back at Satyaki: to fight on in the heart of the night. Fearing for him, the Pandavas and Dhrishtadyumna stream forward around Satyaki and on the other side, Drona and Aswatthama ride to Karna. The sky is lit by jagged bolts of astras. Fighting as never before, Karna dominates Kurukshetra: in majestic inspiration, he smashes Dhrish-tadyumna's bow and his chariot, leaving the Panchala breathless.

Karna is aflame and the Pandava soldiers fly from him. They don't care who else they face, as long as it is not him. Kunti's eldest son rules Kurukshetra. Not only has he killed thousands, this night of torches, he has brought such fear to the enemy that Pandava soldiers cry out when the breeze brushes their faces, thinking it is Karna. Yudhishtira is terrified, as he helplessly watches the brother

he does not know raze his army.

Arjuna cries to his dark sarathy, “Look at Yudhishtira, Krishna. He trembles like a child and hardly hopes we will last the night against Karna. I never knew this evil one could fight like this! It seems only now he truly reveals himself; who can stand before him tonight? I must stop him, Krishna. Come, let us ride against the sutaputra.”

But Krishna knows about the Shakti Indra gave Karna. He knows that not even Arjuna can resist that weapon. And as Karna is now, a pure kshatriya, alight on Kurukshetra, he will hardly think of Arjuna as his brother, if he dares face him. Karna would use the Shakti against the Pandava and everything would be lost. His cause deeper than anyone else can fathom, his mission in the world past common understanding, the Avatara knows that one precious life must be sacrificed to save Arjuna’s. Arjuna must be kept safe at any cost: he is the key to this war; only he can kill Karna. Karna grows in stature with every life he takes. The earlier valor of Satyaki and Arjuna pales before the way the lord of Anga rages now. After seeing Karna tonight, who could say that Arjuna is the greatest archer in the world? Karna blazes on Kurukshetra, the night belongs just to him.

Krishna says softly, “There are only two warriors on our side who can stand against Karna tonight. You are one, Arjuna and the other is Ghatotkacha. Night makes him stronger; he can kill anyone by darkness. Look where Drona stalks Yudhishtira again, stealthily through the corpses with which Karna strews the field. If the subtle brahmana takes your brother, all your valor, all the heroism of your brothers and your friends, all the lives of those that have died for you will have been in vain. Drona hunts like the night leopard and Yudhishtira is the calf he is after. Your first dharma is to protect your brother. Send Ghatotkacha out against Karna and let us ride to Yudhishtira’s side.”

Arjuna wonders at the look in Krishna’s eye. Was it a trick of the torches, or did he see a tear in those black depths? But he cannot ignore his sarathy’s warning. Arjuna summons Ghatotkacha with a thought. In a moment, the rakshasa stands before them, his eyes glowing.

Krishna smiles at Bheema’s son and says, “Karna devours our army and no one can stand before him. Drona and his son are also out hunting tonight. Your uncle Arjuna must watch over Yudhishtira like his very life. Ghatotkacha, if you don’t stop Karna, I fear the war will end tonight and the earth will belong to Duryodhana. Karna must be killed and no one can do this thing but you. Take your astras, open Yama’s door for him.”

Ghatotkacha bows gravely, “I will go at once.”

A pang in his heart, Arjuna says, “Take Satyaki with you. Together, you will tame the sutaputra.”

Krishna’s face is bland. If any evil premonition stirs in Ghatotkacha, he shows no sign of it but seems pleased he has been chosen for this mission. Anyway, the high rakshasas are magical beings, creatures of twilight that make no stark difference between the realms of waking and dreams, or life and death, as men do.

Ghatotkacha arms himself to the fangs and comes into battle mounted in a white chariot. Around him, again, his legion of rakshasas swarms. Lithe they are and powerful; their skins shine by the light of the torches. Most are at least a head taller than the men they have come to fight. All of them bear eerie weapons in their hands, sorcerous ayudhas and every rakshasa is a master of maya. Just seeing that force, the Kaurava soldiers scatter.

TWENTY-SEVEN

GHATOTKACHA RULES THE NIGHT

Duryodhana sees his soldiers flee one side of the battlefield. He sees Ghatotkacha advance on Karna and turns to Dusasana in alarm, “Ghatotkacha rides at Karna with his devils. Take ten men for every rakshasa, go quickly, my brother! Karna must be protected.”

Dusasana turns to go, when another rakshasa speaks out of the darkness. It is Jatapura, whose father Bheema once killed, on an adventure of his. In his element, by night, he says to Duryodhana, “This is my chance to avenge my father. Let me kill Bheema’s son and drink his blood under the stars.”

Gladly, Duryodhana sends Jatapura¹ out against Ghatotkacha. On his way, the demon kills a thousand Pandava soldiers. He is taller than any of Ghatotkacha’s warriors, taller than Bheema’s son. He is pale-skinned, for he is of another race of rakshasas, from another part of the earth. Jatapura does not ride into battle but comes to fight on foot, like some curse. He comes veiled in maya and can only rarely be seen.

He roars at Ghatotkacha, “You are neither a human nor one of our people. Get down from your chariot, if you dare: let us fight like rakshasas!”

He cries out a resonant challenge in their weird tongue. Ghatotkacha leaps down from his chariot. The sight of them, circling each other, one white and the other black, their eyes luminous, their ears pointed, their movements feline, makes the human soldiers around them shiver and step back. But torches are held for the two to fight to the death.

Their roars are fearsome, their blows dark whiplashes. Soon, blood blossoms on their faces. At times they lock with each other, so the muscles on their bodies stand out like serpents, glistening with the sweat that covers them. Then, one of them wrenches free and flails at the other with a clenched fist, or a vicious kick too swift to see, felling him. But neither stays down for more than a moment. Two human armies hold their breath around the inhuman warriors. Long they fight, until Ghatotkacha decides he has had enough of unarmed combat. With a blow like an earthquake, he knocks Jatapura down. Before that rakshasa can rise, Ghatotkacha sweeps up a long scimitar and hews off his head with a stroke that makes an arc of torches on its gleaming blade.

Jatapura’s scream echoes through the field, dying only when his head lands

twenty feet from his body, blood shining in a trail between. Ghatotkacha picks up the grisly head and runs toward Duryodhana's chariot. Gore from Jatasura's neck flows over his black body and the men around him cower from Bheema's son.

In a ringing voice, Ghatotkacha cries to Duryodhana, "One must never visit a king without a gift. I have brought you a gift, Duryodhana!"

He flings Jatasura's head into his chariot, at the Kaurava's feet. Duryodhana leaps back with a cry. His lips wet with Jatasura's blood, Ghatotkacha says, "I will bring you another gift before the night ends, one you will love. Uncle, I will bring you Karna's head!"

Duryodhana stands too shocked to retort. With a smile, Bheema's son lopes back into battle. The Kaurava army parts for him and he quickly finds himself facing the lord of Anga by rushlight. Ghatotkacha's eyes are torches burning with their own fire. The rakshasa stands heaving before Karna; he stands swirled about in maya, that mysterious being. At times, the two armies see him, but mostly he is invisible. A hush falls on Kurukshetra, but it is broken by loud, rich laughter. Karna's eyes are not deceived for a moment by Ghatotkacha's maya; he sees the rakshasa, wraith-like, even when he is invisible to all the others. Karna throws back his head and mocks him with laughter, diminishing his spell of fear.

Ghatotkacha answers the mockery with an astra that immolates a thousand Kaurava soldiers. Kurukshetra is lit up, with men burning like rushlights. Roaring, Karna looses five silver shafts at him. Ghatotkacha has been taught by his uncle Arjuna and strikes them aside with ease. Again, the rakshasa fights with maya; and now he not only makes himself invisible, but casts potent spells at his enemy. Great winds rise out of nowhere and blow away lines of Kaurava soldiers; or sheets of flame flash from the rakshasa's hands, ashing entire legions.

Karna douses fire with rain. He stills tempests with unerring shafts that put out their stormy eyes. Karna is effulgent on Kurukshetra, with the light of his father. His bow is a sliver of the sun in his hands and the battle against Ghatotkacha isn't a duel merely of the earth. All around Karna his soldiers run, screaming in terror of the rakshasa, or they are slain by his sorcery. Karna himself stands unmoved, his arrows a Ganga of flames from his hands.

Ghatotkacha is quenchless. One moment, he fights with sharp wooden shafts from the ground and Karna is hard-pressed to hold him off. The next instant, the rakshasa treads air with maya, invisibly and now his arrows are astras of sinuous darkness. Karna fights at the limits of his prodigious ability, for

his very life. Ghatotkacha is everywhere. He is all the night of a thousand forms, a thousand fears. When Karna pierces his maya in the air, in a flash he assumes some monstrous shape on the ground, goes among the Kaurava soldiers as a Beast, with a thousand heads.

Duryodhana watches from a safe distance, in concern. It does not seem even Karna will be any match, tonight, for Ghatotkacha. Only the most intrepid soldiers continue to stand around the two, holding torches for them to fight by: for to be anywhere near is to court death.

Then, another demon arrives, tall and ferile, on Kurukshetra with a hideous army. Vile, slouching beasts march behind the pale stranger and surely never before, since the earliest days, would such fiends have dared to approach a Kuru king without being slain on sight. It is the rakshasa Alayudha, whom even his own kind shun, come to offer his services to Duryodhana. The creatures that march in his yowling, gibbering legion are monsters that never show themselves when the sun is up.

Bheeshma would not have let these devils near the army of Hastinapura. The desperate Duryodhana senses an ally and welcomes him. In sibilant tones, the rakshasa says, "I am Alayudha. Hidimba, Kirmira and Baka were my kin². Bheema slew them all and I have come for revenge. I hunt only by dark, so I waited until you fought under the stars." He bares his fangs in a grin that makes even Duryodhana's skin crawl. "Hidimbi belonged to us all in the vana. But Bheema took her for himself and he is not even one of us. Their child is a monster, of neither your kind nor mine. He is an unnatural thing, a blot on the face of the earth. He must die and Bheema must die. I, Alayudha, have come to drink their blood."

If he were not so repelled by the stench of this rakshasa, Duryodhana may have clasped the devil to him. As it is, he cries, "Welcome, Alayudha, to the army of Hastinapura! Bheema's son rules this night and no one can stand before him. You have come to be my savior. Look where Ghatotkacha burns my army. Go friend! Kill Bheema's boy and you shall find me forever grateful."

Karna is, by far, the finest archer in the Kaurava army. He is a legion of marksmen by himself. He is better than Aswatthama, Drona, Kripa and Kritavarman; he is better than all of them together. Long ago, Yudhishtira glimpsed Karna's genius at the tournament in Hastinapura and he knew this was the greatest bowman in the world. Yes, even greater than Arjuna. Ever since, he has dreaded Karna. Now, this naked midnight of the war, Karna dominates Kurukshetra with his immaculate gifts. Yet, the one who confronts him tonight is

a match even for him. Ghatotkacha contains Karna and even as he does, he slaughters the Kaurava army.

Alayudha comes into battle, his malignant platoon streaming behind him, many of those rakshasas shambling on all fours, their eyes green slits. Ghatotkacha greets the force of demons with weapons of fire and wind and braids of lightning that streak along the ground through their lines. Raising their evil faces to bay at the enemy, the rakshasas come on in a wave, unmindful of their own that fall screaming among them, torched.

Soon, Ghatotkacha is contained, since now two powerful enemies assail him at once. For all his rank appearance, Alayudha is a warrior, his courage boundless. He is also impervious to most weapons, calmly plucking them out of his milk-white skin. Then, he comes on again, death at his bow, his curved sword and his fangs and talons he uses to tear down those who stand before him. Alayudha quaffs the blood of the men he kills and soon his lean form is covered in deep scarlet, shining slickly by the torches.

Bheema sees his son beset by two enemies and attacks Alayudha with a gale of arrows. Seeing the father come to battle, Alayudha turns away from the son. His army eddying around him, he rushes snarling at Bheema. By dark, the demons have the better of Yudhishtira's soldiers. Supernatural fear numbs the Pandava legions. The rakshasas kill them with fang and claw, with sinister weapons and sorcery. Alayudha and Bheema face each other at the heart of all the blood flying. Bheema is bemused by the rakshasa's maya; the duel against an enemy who is seldom visible is not one he relishes. Alayudha smashes the Pandava's chariot. Bheema leaps down from its ruins and the two fight with maces.

At the edge of the war, Krishna turns to Arjuna. "We must go to Bheema!"

Arjuna comes to battle like a spirit of light. Krishna pilots his chariot straight to Ghatotkacha's side. Arjuna engages Karna, while Krishna cries to Bheema's son, "Your father needs your help against Alayudha. Fly to him!"

Karna makes to pursue Ghatotkacha, but Arjuna raises a screen of arrows in his path. Roaring, Karna turns on his brother. Ghatotkacha flies out of the sky at Alayudha. Like the heart of the midnight wind he swoops and hacks off the white rakshasa's head with a bright blow of his sword. Alayudha's blood sprays across his own people with the force of Ghatotkacha's arm. It is as if they have all been slain with that stroke: panic takes them. Maddened, they run every way and the avenging Pandava army cuts them down as they please.

Ghatotkacha picks up Alayudha's head from the ground. Bearing it aloft he runs to Duryodhana's chariot again. Grinning, he flings the ruddy thing at the Kaurava's feet. Duryodhana jumps back from it with a roar. Ghatotkacha has already returned to the fighting.

Bheema's son rules the night's heart. He massacres the enemy as not Bheema, Arjuna, Satyaki or any of the others have yet done. He burns them, he blows them away: whole legions with astras and with subtle, deadly maya, so they hardly know they have been killed. Only Karna prevents him from razing all Duryodhana's army, only Karna holds him up in the dark. When Ghatotkacha lashes down a torrent of fire on the Kaurava forces, Karna blows the burning storm away with a vayavyastra. When it is a cloud of arrows the rakshasa conjures in the sky, Karna dispels it with an aindrastra. But Ghatotkacha is like two armies by himself, on the ground and in the air! Not even Karna can contain him entirely. In a chilling moment, Karna sees an entire complement of Kaurava soldiers beheaded by a flight of golden swords: to this, he has no answer.

Ghatotkacha's inhuman roars fill the darkness and terror worse than death lays hold of Duryodhana's men. And the rakshasa is not alone. Beside him, his father and uncle kill thousands and it seems the war will surely end tonight. Karna hears desperate voices cry to him, "Kill the rakshasa, Karna, or the war is lost!"

"Hah! Save us, Karna! Kill the devil."

"Use your Shakti, Karna. Use Indra's Shakti against the beast. Or we all die tonight!"

"Kill him now or everything is lost!"

Karna hears Duryodhana's desperate cry, "The Shakti, Karna! The Shakti, or we are doomed!"

TWENTY-EIGHT INDRA'S SHAKTI

Karna lays his hand on the Shakti before him and it begins to shine like a piece of a star. His chariot is lit up, blindingly. As he picks up the weapon, he hears the echo of another voice above the tumult of the armies.

Giving Karna his Shakti, Indra said, 'You can cast it only once, against just one enemy. Whoever he may be, he will die. But then the Shakti will return to me.'

Karna had replied, 'I need to use it only once. I have only one enemy.'

Indra laughed, 'You mean Arjuna; but Krishna protects him. Not even with my Shakti can you kill the Pandava.'

But Karna had hoped to cheat fate. Even after he discovered Arjuna was his brother, the old flame of rivalry had not subsided entirely in his heart. He must show the world who its finest archer was. Bheeshma, Drona and the others all said it was Arjuna; he knew they were wrong, he would prove them wrong. Even now, his hand rests reluctantly on the ayudha. Indra had taken his kavacha and kundala; Krishna had struck him deep by telling him Arjuna was his brother. He cannot hope to defeat the Pandava without Indra's Shakti. That would be fateful, indeed: a brother killing his brother with his father's weapon! But now, the rakshasa threatens. The war will end tonight, in defeat for Duryodhana, if Ghatotkacha is not killed. Karna knows that if he uses the Shakti against Ghatotkacha, the war would be as good as lost anyway. For then, what weapon would conquer Arjuna?

Meanwhile, Bheema's son is death's gory specter on Kurukshetra. Again, Karna hears Duryodhana cry at him, "The Shakti, Karna, kill the rakshasa!"

Tears spring in his eyes, but he is strangely glad as well. Now he would not kill his brother; instead, he would die at his hands. Ah, sweet death: end of the long cruelty that had been his life! For his friend he would die, for his brothers, most of all, for his mother, for Kunti. That was what she wanted, wasn't it? That Arjuna kills Karna. Karna raises the Shakti above his head. It is as if a midnight sun has risen on Kurukshetra. Light floods the field. Karna stands at the heart of that splendor; tears like fire-drops scald his eyes.

With an echoing cry, he casts Indra's Shakti at Bheema's son. Time stands still as the Shakti flashes from his hands. It seems to take an age to traverse the night to its target. Ghatotkacha stands helpless in its path, his mantle of maya

torn apart by the coruscance of the Shakti. Fearlessly, he watches his death come for him. All his wild and tender life flashes before him in the yawning moment the ayudha takes to arrive. With a roar beginning on his lips, Ghatotkacha grows big as a hill. He towers over the Kaurava army. Before his roar ends, with a report like ten thunderclaps, the Shakti crashes into his chest in an explosion of light. The weapon blows a great hole in Ghatotkacha's chest, killing him instantly. He falls like a mountain on Duryodhana's army, crushing tens of thousands of soldiers in his final moment, a whole aksauhini, just as he intended. In the shocked silence, Bheema's roars echo. Again and again, the Pandava roars his grief into the still night.

That sound is music to Duryodhana's ears. He flies to Karna, pulls his friend into his own chariot and embraces him. His arm around his warrior, Duryodhana rides triumphally through his army and the soldiers cry out Karna's name, Duryodhana's and 'Jaya'!

At the edge of the battle, Bheema sits on the ground and buries his face in his hands. A moment ago, it seemed Ghatotkacha by himself would win this war for them; now, the shock of his death lances through Yudhishtira's legions. Numbly, the Pandava king rides to Bheema's side. Yudhishtira is also sobbing helplessly. Ghatotkacha was his first nephew and always his favorite child. He sits beside Bheema bereft on the ground, the stricken Bheema. Yudhishtira takes his brother's hand. He wipes Bheema's tears, while his own flow: their arms around each other, the two of them mourn.

All the Pandava army is stunned when Ghatotkacha falls. There is one exception: Krishna exults! Arjuna climbs down from his chariot and stands too shocked to shed a tear. But his sarathy leaps down from his chariot-head in unashamed delight. Crying out in jubilation, he embraces Arjuna. The soldiers around them watch the strange sight curiously.

Arjuna turns on Krishna in anguish. "My Lord! Am I dreaming, or are you pleased Ghatotkacha is dead? Bheema's son has died, what makes you so happy?"

Krishna takes Arjuna by his shoulders. "This is the happiest day of my life! I don't celebrate Ghatotkacha's death, but the manner in which he died."

"What do you mean?"

"The war is won! Don't you see, Arjuna, Ghatotkacha's life was the price of victory: and I swear he will not have died in vain. Now Yudhishtira will surely sit upon the throne of the earth."

“Whatever do you mean, Krishna? I don’t understand a word you are saying.”

“It is so plain! Now Karna is dead. The only man I feared of the enemy. You still don’t see? The Shakti, Arjuna: he could use it only once and he has. If you knew how many sleepless nights I have spent thinking of Karna with his Shakti, perhaps you would understand my relief. Arjuna, Ghatotkacha has died in your place and I don’t fear Karna any more.”

Arjuna still looks puzzled. Krishna goes on, more softly now, “Everyone said Arjuna is invincible, that he is the greatest kshatriya on earth. I knew they were all wrong. Karna would have killed you with the Shakti. Do you know what Duryodhana said to me when I went to try to make peace in Hastinapura? He said, ‘I have Karna on my side. He by himself will win the war for me.’

Bheeshma and Drona scoffed at him; and they would, because they believed their Arjuna was invincible. But Duryodhana loves Karna and his love made him more clear-eyed than the rest. Arjuna, Duryodhana was right. Only he realizes Karna’s true worth.” His voice is a whisper now, deafening Arjuna.

Krishna says, “You see, I also knew the truth: that of all the archers on earth, Arjuna is not the greatest one but Karna. You may have beaten him twice, but you are not his equal at all. There is no archer like Karna. Before the war began, Bheeshma contemptuously refused even to include Karna among the maharathikas of the Kaurava army. He said that, without his kavacha and kundala, he was at best an ardharathika. But your Pitama was wrong, you know. Why, as long as Karna had Indra’s Shakti, not the armies of Devaloka could face him. As long as he had either his kavacha and kundala, or the Shakti, not Indra, Varuna or Kubera could defeat him. Not you, with the Gandiva, not I, with the Sudarshana, could kill Karna!

Now he is like a serpent without its fangs, a God who is not immortal any more. Even now, only you can kill him, Arjuna. But at least it can be done.”

Arjuna listens, astonished. Satyaki has joined them, he, also, amazed by what Krishna says. The Dark One goes on gravely, “Karna is the most misunderstood, most demeaned man on earth. You have no idea who he is, what he is. Ah, he is like the sun at noon, too bright to gaze upon. Arjuna, this enemy of yours is not just the best archer in the world, but the most pious, noble man on earth. Why, those who know his heart will claim he is as great as Yudhishtira, greater. Who has suffered as Karna has? You five have always had one another to take comfort from, during your trials. But whom does Karna have? He is alone and alone he has borne his torments.

But the time draws near for his anguish to end, in the only way it can. It is time for great Karna to die. Without his Shakti, you can kill him. Only then will this war be won and Yudhishtira sit upon the throne of the world, as he was born to. You ask me why I rejoice at Ghatotkacha's death. I rejoice because he gave his life to save the world; he gave his life so your life may be saved. He made the noblest sacrifice of all, the needful one."

They hear exuberant roaring as the Kaurava army comes streaming back into battle, to celebrate Ghatotkacha's death. Satyaki asks, "But, Krishna, why didn't Karna use the Shakti against Arjuna?"

Krishna smiles, he says, "Every night, they would speak of nothing else in their tents, Duryodhana, Dusasana, Shakuni and Karna. All these days Karna stalked Arjuna, so he could cast the Shakti at him. But I knew he had the weapon and that is why, Arjuna, time and again I avoided Karna. When, once or twice, we did face him, I made him forget he had the Shakti!"

The battle rages once more by the sea of torches. Krishna says, "Drona is attacking us again. His soldiers are wild with joy at Ghatotkacha's death. Come, we must rally our forces."

Some way off, Yudhishtira raises his tearful face and whispers to Bheema, "My brother, Drona rides at us again. I feel too faint to come to battle. Bheema, go and face the Acharya; he will take great toll of us if he isn't contained."

Heartbroken and radiantly brave, Bheema wipes his eyes. He clasps his brother once, tightly and then goes out to vent his sorrow on the enemy. Yudhishtira sits slumped against his chariot-wheel, sobbing desperately now and again. When Krishna comes to him, he finds the gentle Pandava has fainted from a grief he cannot support.

Gently, Krishna wakes his cousin. He says, "This weakness is not for a kshatriya and a king. Your army depends on you; every man in it fights for you. You must master your sorrow, all will be lost if you succumb like this."

Yudhishtira fetches a sigh. His eyes still stream and he says, "Ah, Krishna, I know, I know. Nothing is certain in war, from moment to moment. But won't I be the worst sinner if I don't grieve for my precious child, my sweet Ghatotkacha? Let me recount, at least once, all that he did for us and so quietly, with never a thought for himself. You did not know him as I did, Krishna. He was so loving, more than any other child in our family. He was the first in his generation and I loved him twice as much as I do Sahadeva. And ever since he was an infant, he was specially fond of me."

Krishna realizes he must allow Yudhishtira this expiation of remembrance. Softly, as if to himself, Yudhishtira goes on, “He spent his childhood with us and he was such an intelligent boy. He learned everything so quickly, Krishna: the Shastras from me, archery from Arjuna, fighting with the mace from his father, until he went away with his mother. Later, when we were in exile in the Kamyaka vana, Ghatotkacha heard Arjuna had left us to sit in tapasya. He knew how much we would miss our brother and he came there and spent some months with us. How thoughtful he was! And such a joy, always self-effacing and so resourceful. On Himavan, when Draupadi and I could not climb up to Badarikasrama, Bheema summoned Ghatotkacha. He came with his people and they carried us on their backs and flew to Nara Narayana’s asrama.

Since the war began, he has been with us. You saw how he fought, how bravely, how carelessly of his own life. And not for kingdom, or any desire for it: if he was alive and we won, he would only have gone back to his jungles. Power and kingdom meant nothing to him. He came to fight just out of love; and he, who least deserved to die, has been sacrificed to this gruesome war. Oh, how will I ever know happiness again when my pure child is dead?

When Abhimanyu was killed, none of us was near him; but Ghatotkacha died before our eyes. What was the point in killing Jayadratha for Abhimanyu’s death? Drona and Karna were to blame and they have not paid for what they did. Even now, no one speaks of killing Karna for what he has done to our precious child.”

Then, rage grips Yudhishtira. He rises, quivering. “But I will not leave him alive. I will avenge my Ghatotkacha tonight!”

Not looking back at Krishna, Yudhishtira climbs into his chariot. Krishna runs to Arjuna. In this mood, Yudhishtira must be guarded closely. In alarm, Krishna and Arjuna watch him make his way round the rest of the army. He means to ride at Karna through the Kaurava ranks. They pursue him as swiftly as they can. Suddenly, a glowing figure looms before Yudhishtira’s chariot in the night. His horses rear, neighing, in fear of the dark, matt-haired apparition that bars their way. Tossing their manes, they stop still before that wild and holy one.

Vyasa says quietly to his Pandava grandson, “Ghatotkacha’s death was written long ago, Yudhishtira. He was born to die for you. You must not give in to sorrow; all your army depends on you. If Karna had not killed Ghatotkacha with the Shakti, Arjuna would have died by it. And then this war would really have been in vain: for then, not you, but Duryodhana would have sat upon the throne of the world.”

Yudhishtira stands, hands folded, his good sense slowly returning to him. Vyasa continues, "Just five days more, Yudhishtira. Five days more and victory will be yours. Five days and you will be lord of the earth and the light of dharma will shine again in the dark world. And those whom you want to see punished for what they have done shall be dead. Go back to your brothers. You will achieve nothing by riding out like this, except getting yourself killed; and if you do, everything will truly be lost."

Yudhishtira shivers when he realizes how close he has come to destroying himself and his sacred cause. He bows to his grandfather, who vanishes before him as mysteriously as he appeared. Krishna and Arjuna ride up beside Yudhishtira. Together, they turn back the way they came and a moment fraught with danger passes.

TWENTY-NINE

DRONA

The two hosts rush at each other by torchlight and the killing begins again; the air is shrill with the screams of a thousand dying men, thick with the roars of their killers. But past the midnight hour, deep tiredness is upon them all as well. They have been fighting since morning and there are those that actually fall asleep where they stand and have their heads struck off by an enemy almost as exhausted.

Arjuna's voice rings out above every other sound of battle. "All of us are tired. I say we should sleep an hour or two before we fight again."

Shouts of approval from both armies greet this. Not waiting a moment, every soldier on that field lays down his weapons, lies on the blessed earth and lets sleep come over him. Some Kaurava soldiers cry before they fall asleep, "God bless Arjuna for his mercy!"

Then, soon, silence; only a sea of breathing heaves against night's deep quiet. Kurukshetra lies darkling, a child that has sobbed itself to sleep, scarlet trails on her face. The sleeping and the dead lie side by side, indistinguishable. A moon the hue of blood rises high over this spectacle, a cardinal lotus blooming in the sky. As Soma Deva climbs higher, his ruddy complexion fades and Kurukshetra is bathed in silver light.

There is one man who does not sleep tonight. Drona sits alone at the edge of the field of death and a profound sense of doom is upon him. At night's abysmal heart, all his life plays itself out phantas-magorically before his eyes. He sees himself as a boy again: his idyllic tutelage in his father Bharad-vaja's asrama. He sees Drupada beside him, also a boy. He hears their innocent voices, full of wonder, full of love. Tears well in Drona's eyes and roll down his cheeks. Then, later, Aswatthama is a child; his father hears him ask in his lisping voice to taste milk. An uncanny breeze starts around Drona, plucking at his face. He sees himself come to Drupada's court, hoping to find a new life, most of all for his son. For the first time, he tastes the hubris of kings, their selfishness. Drupada breaks his heart with scorn. Even then, he could have turned back to the natural forest. That should have been taste enough for him to realize he did not belong in the world of power, the harsh world of the kshatriya.

But he was young and rash; he took the wrong turn. Thirsty for revenge, he

went to Hastinapura. Now, alone here in the outer darkness, he sees it all so clearly. He sees his terrible mistakes, the first steps on the road to sin. He was a brahmana; he did not belong in the court of a kshatriya king, least of all, as a teacher of archery. But he also realizes he could hardly have helped himself. Untenable sorrow turned into the rage that obsessed him: sorrow and his pride. If only he had understood this then, they would not have consumed his life.

He sees himself walking into Hastinapura, to Kripa's house. He sees it all as if it was happening again before his eyes, in this dense night full of ghosts of every kind, full of the lost times of the earth. He went to Bheeshma and told him how Drupada had humiliated him and he wanted revenge. The Kuru Pitama smiled: a smile that mocked Drona's youthful earnestness. Quietly, Bheeshma said, 'You have come to the right place. I have a hundred grandsons, all eager to learn archery.'

Drona stayed on in Hastinapura. The demon revenge possessed him and he did not think what he was sacrificing for it. Over the years, he lost the gentleness that should have been part of his nature. He lost the dignity and freedom that should have been his. He became just a hireling of the Kurus. Over the years, this gnawed at him. Yet, more than anything, he wanted revenge against Drupada.

Revenge he had, when Arjuna routed the Panchala king. But when Drona saw his childhood friend humbled before him, he cried, 'I only wanted to teach you a lesson. Let us be friends again.' How naive he had been to think a kshatriya would forget that shame, or ever think of him as his equal. Drupada prayed for a son who would kill Drona.

The breeze swells into a midnight wind, whispering death around Drona sitting alone at the edge of Kurukshetra, as the moon washes the violent field in spectral light. His life plays itself out before his weary eyes, eerily.

The brahmana sees himself as a master to the Kuru princes. There, too, he had been a failure. Very early, he had noticed the growing enmity between the sons of Dhritarashtra and the sons of Pandu. As a guru, he could have tried to put an end to that fledgling antagonism, to nip it in the bud. But he had not thought of this as being part of his duties. Indeed, he had subtly fuelled that hatred by turning a blind eye to it: because he thought it helped the princes compete more intensely and thus excel.

This was where his indifference had led them all. Out alone on the deathly field, Drona realizes he had not loved his wards as he should have. He had seen them only as warriors of the future, not as human children.

Now, Drona's eyes leak pointless tears and the cold wind dries them on his face. He should have gone back to the forest when the princes' instruction was complete. The wilderness would have healed him. It would have eased away the worldly mantle with which he had covered himself. He would have been his own master again and for a proud spirit like Drona, that would have cured him as nothing else. But he lingered on in Hastinapura, until the fateful game of dice was played. Even then, it was not too late. He could have spoken out for dharma; it was not as if he did not know who was right and who was wrong. Like Bheeshma, he remained silent. Was it because he revered the Pitama so much that he could not bring himself to speak out when the patriarch held his peace? On Kurukshetra tonight, as two armies lie around him, asleep and dead, Drona faces that terrible question from himself.

He shivers in the dark wind, which seeps into his bones. Drona feels what can only be death's fingers brush his cheek and is filled with remorse. He remembers how Duryodhana came to him, after the Pandavas left for the forest swearing revenge. Duryodhana was afraid his cousins would attack Hastinapura. Even then, the Acharya could have redeemed himself; instead, he rashly promised the Kaurava prince that he would fight for him. More than any other, that promise had sealed Drona's fate. There was no turning back for him.

Now, too late, he sees that a deep sense of inferiority had led him down the path to ruin. Then the war began and Bheeshma fell. Drona became Senapati of the Kaurava army. How proud he had been! No turning back. The cruel night mirrors his mistakes without mercy. Drona sobs like a boy, when he thinks in shame of how he agreed to take Yudhishtira captive. Even that was as nothing compared to what followed.

He remembers the chakra vyuha. He sees every chariot and footsoldier of it with pitiless clarity. He sees himself weave that web, in cold blood, to snare a child. And why? Because Duryodhana taunted him, saying he did not fight as he could. He had known very well that only Abhimanyu could breach the vyuha. It was as if he had stolen into Arjuna's son's tent and stabbed him in his sleep. And Arjuna had treated him as a father, looked up to him even when he fought as Duryodhana's Senapati. What had he said, as he flashed by on his way to kill Jayadratha?

'You are not my enemy. You are my guru.'

But Bheema had not spared him the truth. The night burns Bheema's words like hot knives in his soul. 'Once you were our guru and like a father to us. Now you are an enemy, just another of Duryodhana's minions.'

Suddenly, a voice speaks out of the night to the brahmana. Duryodhana says, "Here you are, Acharya, I have been looking for you."

Quickly, Drona wipes his tears and turns to his king. By the light of the moon, for the first time he sees Duryodhana as he truly is: a beast of darkness, his eyes full of evil. Drona controls himself and says, "Yes, Duryodhana? Is there something you wanted to say to me?"

His voice cold and mocking, as ever, Duryodhana says, "Nothing new, Acharya. Only what I have been saying to you all these days, since you became our Senapati. You have astras that can raze the enemy, whenever you decide that you will win this war for us. But Arjuna still rules your heart. Did you see how many of our men he killed today? You hardly tried to stop him. Drona, you must make up your mind if it is the Pandavas you fight for or us."

Drona growls, "I have always done my best for you. But you know, as well as I do, that it is a crime to use the devastras against common soldiers."

His eyes malevolent, Duryodhana answers his master with silence. Drona sighs, "I have already sworn I will not remove this armor from my body until I have killed all the Panchalas and Kekayas. But you are my king and I am your Senapati. I will obey you. If you command me to use the devastras against common Pandava soldiers, so be it. My life is hardly worth living any more and with this final crime, death will come for me: though I know that is of small concern to you.

But listen to me, Duryodhana. I, too, have something to say to you, which I have said before. Not with the devastras, or any weapon that your warriors possess, can Arjuna be killed. No kshatriya that fights for you, not all of them together, can bring him down."

A tremor of resentment ripples through the Kaurava. He says, "We will bring down your Arjuna, Acharya. Between Karna, Dusasana, Shakuni and me, we will kill your great archer."

Drona smiles more scathingly than anything he can say and does not reply. Duryodhana continues, "From now, let us divide our army in two. We four will take one half and ride against the Pandavas. You take the other half. Fight if you will, Acharya, or stand aside and contemplate your Arjuna's greatness.

Drona smiles. "I wish you well, Duryodhana. You have lived a full life, so you need have no regret as you set out on this brave mission. Only when you face him yourself, will you discover who Arjuna is. Until then, you won't believe what I say." There is bitterness in the brahmana's voice. "You have

always been suspicious, never knowing who loves you and who does not.” He laughs. “But I am forgetting you are a kshatriya born in the House of Kuru. It is only natural that you want to fight Arjuna yourself. I wondered why you hardly fought all these days, while all around you hundreds of thousands died for your sake. For the sake of your greed.

After all, what have you to fear, when your uncle goes into battle with you? The mighty Shakuni! The one who has brought us all to this pass. The master of the dice-board will do what no kshatriya has yet: he will vanquish Arjuna in battle, as easily as he did Yudhishtira at dice!”

Drona laughs again, grimly. “Yes, how often I have heard you say in your father’s sabha, ‘We three, Dusasana, Karna and I, are enough to kill the five Pandavas.’ Your time is here, Duryodhana. You have drunk deeper from the cup of pleasure than most kings do in ten lifetimes. You have wielded power as no other man in the world. And yes, you have been generous to those whom you love. You have done much good, as well and as far as I know, you are not in debt to anyone. So, go boldly and fight the Pandavas. You have tasted everything that life has to offer someone like you. Now die gloriously at your cousins’ hands!”

Drona gets up and walks away from Duryodhana, who stands gazing out into the night for a long time after his Senapati has gone.

THIRTY

ONE WHITE LIE

Battle resumes by the light of the streaming moon. Awakened by echoing conches, the soldiers of both armies rise¹ and, somewhat rested, fall at each other again. The moon has risen late. It is the last yaama of the night and soon the sun touches the eastern sky with livid fingers. A cheer goes up from both armies, as the star slides over the horizon and casts his luster across the field of death. It is the fifteenth day of the war, the fifth of Drona's command.

As the sun rises, for the first time the armies clearly see the devastation the night has left. Kurukshetra is uneven with corpses, like anthills; and, among them, a mountain: noble Ghatotkacha's body. But there is no time to mourn the dead, or to honor them with cremation. The war rages on.

Krishna sees the enemy legions now divided in two. He says to Arjuna, "Look to the left where Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and Dusasana fight in a cluster, like a baleful constellation."

Bheema, who is near them, shouts, "Let us turn to the left! All those we have sworn to kill ride in a pack like dogs."

Arjuna takes up the Gandiva and Krishna points his horses at the Kaurava king and his coterie. Arjuna comes in wrath; his arrows obscure the face of the rising sun. Easy as it was for Duryodhana to imagine that he and his inner circle would vanquish Arjuna, in battle they cannot stand before the Pandava at all. He quickly puts the four to flight, their army following and thousands cut down by the riptide from the Gandiva.

Meanwhile, with half the Kaurava army, Drona rides at the Matsyas, the Panchalas and the Kekayas. He is like fire that does not smoke. Certainty of his end is upon him. The enemy shrinks from him in awe; the brahmana's body is as bright as a Deva's. Yet, he is purely dreadful, like an evil amsa of Agni. Drona does not care any more if it is a kshatriya or a common soldier that stands before him; he consumes both with astras. He torches legions, leaving nothing but statues of ashes, which the wind blows down.

Drona sees three of Dhrishtadyumna's sons riding at him, naively. He kills all three, in a moment, striking their heads from their necks with his famous crescent-tipped arrows. He kills the boys where their grandfather sees them die. Drupada's roars shake the field and he rushes at Drona. This is exactly what

Drona wants; he does not mean to leave the Panchala king alive, when his own death is so near him.

Virata rides beside Drupada at the hated brahmana. Drona is ready for them both. He engages them powerfully, fighting as Drupada has never seen him do, as Drupada had never known he could.

Drona cries at his old friend, his old enemy, "This is the end, Drupada. Everything will be over today!"

"When you die, vile Brahmana!"

Drona casts a gleaming javelin, striking the Panchala king through his heart, killing him instantaneously. Demented Drona turns on Virata and kills him with another lance, affixing him to his chariot-head. Uproar breaks out among the Pandava legions. Crimson-eyed, Dhrishtadyumna cries, "He has killed my sons and my father. If I don't kill Drona today, let all my life's punya be lost!"

He plunges at Drona; but Duryodhana's legion rings the Acharya round. Arjuna and his brothers fly to help Dhrishtadyumna and a general battle ensues. After a wild hour, Drona still dominates Kurukshetra and Dhrishtadyumna is no nearer killing him. To provoke him into the deed, Bheema scoffs at his friend, "It doesn't seem you will avenge your father or your sons. Let me help you, Dhrishtadyumna!"

Roaring twice as loudly as anyone else, Bheema rushes at the Kaurava army. The Pandava heroes fight, all together, trying to force a way through to where their Acharya burns like time. On the fifteenth day of the war, Drona bestrides Kurukshetra, as Bheeshma could not on the ninth day, when the Kuru Pitama was at his fiercest. But Bheeshma had fought with dharma, while Drona, in the clasp of despair after the night's revelations, has abandoned the way of truth entirely.

The brahmana incinerates Yudhishtira's common legions with the greater devastras. Fire stalks Kurukshetra and Drona is Agni incarnate. The war is Drona and he is death come naked to the world. Everywhere the sickly-sweet smell of burnt human flesh hangs in the air. The Kauravas rally around their Senapati and not the five Pandavas together can contain him. Few duels are fought, the war swirls around just Drona. Duryodhana and Nakula face each other briefly; and the Kaurava has his bow snapped in his palm and hastily retreats. Dusasana encounters Sahadeva and here also the Pandava prevails after a short, fierce encounter. In another duel, Karna and Bheema meet. In memory of how Karna humiliated him, Bheema fights beyond himself for revenge.

Again, he finds Karna is an archer of superior gifts. Karna strikes Bheema unconscious in his chariot, then, spares his life once more.

Meanwhile, Krishna maneuvers Arjuna's chariot to confront Drona and Kurukshetra seems transported to another world by the duel between that master and disciple, each fighting at the very ends of his skill. In two brilliant bands, astras sizzle across the field of moment. Only those who are masters themselves of the missiles can fathom the subtleties of that contention; the others watch, awed.

For some time, they fight, guru and sishya and neither prevails. Then, Drona, who by now hardly knows what he does, invokes a fearsome weapon. The brahmana summons the greatest brahmastra². Kurukshetra is rocked by a seismic tremor and a sudden night falls, when he chants the mantra for the transcendent ayudha. Only Drona's chariot is enveloped in such light that the soldiers turn their faces from it. At its white heart, Drona draws back his bowstring and his body is a flame. In a moment, the old master looses the weapon at his favorite pupil. Pandavas and Kauravas wait, breathless; they know this is a moment that can end the war.

The brahmastra flares up into the darkened sky, lights it like five suns. Then, like doom, it falls on Arjuna's chariot. But a gasp goes up from the armies of darkness and light. At the heart of that moment, Arjuna's chariot also blazes like a star; his body is a pale fire as well and the Gandiva a lucific crescent in his hands. Another sun flames up from the Pandava's bow and brahmastra and brahmastra meet in the sky. An explosion like the world ending shakes heaven and earth, a million men fall dazed on the ground. Astra blows astra apart on high; they blow the darkness away and it is daylight again on Kurukshetra. With a long roar of frustration, Drona rides away from Arjuna.

The fighting grows diffuse again, as many duels break out. At least for the time being, Arjuna has broken Drona's dominance: the brahmana rides away to savage the Panchala army once more. Dhr-ishtadyumna and Dusasana face each other; but the Kaurava cannot stand against the angry fire-prince. Swiftly, he has his bow cloven and his sarathy leaves the field before his warrior is killed.

Another duel rages nearby, a piquant one. Chance brings Duryodhana and Satyaki face to face. They fight fiercely, but with smiles on their faces! Though Duryodhana is some years the older, these two had once been inseparable friends. Suddenly, Duryodhana feels a pang of remorse. He roars at Satyaki, "What a despicable war this is, in which you and I must fight each other. How I hate myself sometimes, Satyaki, for my arrogance, my lust for kingdom and that

I am a kshatriya! Otherwise, we two would never face each other with arrows today.”

He lowers his bow briefly and so does Satyaki, a little startled. The Kaurava continues, “Do you remember the old days, my friend? How clearly they rise before my eyes, as if they were happening again. You were dearer to me than my very life and I to you! Look where time has brought us.”

Duryodhana’s confession is sharper than his arrows and Satyaki is taken aback to see the Kaurava wipe tears from his eyes. The Yadava cries, “All that is past, Duryodhana! This is not our guru’s house, when I was a boy and you a youth and you were so fond of me that you would play children’s games with me.”

Duryodhana says, “Oh, where are those innocent games? This is like another life and we are like strangers, Satyaki. How cruel time is. Look at us today. Fate is merciless, my friend and fate is my enemy. Karna always says that if fate is against you, there is nothing you can do. It is not we but fate that decides our lives, every moment of them.”

Quickly, tears fill the softhearted Satyaki’s eyes and he says, “We are kshatriyas and war is our dharma. There is no escape from that, Duryodhana. We fight and must not care if it is our brother or our friend we kill; if a sishya kills a guru or a guru his sishya. Duryodhana, if you still love me, I beg you, kill me quickly! I can’t bear to see you like this, or hear you speak thus to me.”

With a sigh, Duryodhana raises his bow and they fight again. Soon, Satyaki strikes the Kaurava down in his chariot and then rides away, with all the memories welling in his heart. He had seen his friend Duryodhana turn to arrogance and harshness, to ruthlessness; and against that Duryodhana he could fight. But now, he saw another Duryodhana, the loving friend who wept that they must fight, the one who remembered the tender past so well. This Duryodhana, Satyaki cannot bear to face in battle. The Yadava rides away as far from the Kaurava as he can. He will never speak of the moment they have shared, to anyone. Neither will he ever ride against the Kaurava again.

When Arjuna cuts down his brahmastra, he fuels his Acharya’s despair. Drona turns his wrath on the Pandava army. Astra after astra he looses at Yudhishtira’s soldiers; every missile consumes ten thousand men. The brahmana blazes like the sun just before the world ends. It seems his body is swathed in the flames of hell and no one can look at him too long, let alone face him in battle. The carnage is like the slaughter of the creatures at the end of a manvantara.

The Pandava warriors watch him, aghast. They cry to one another, “This isn’t our gentle Acharya. It is not the same man at all.”

“It isn’t Drona, but the demon that has possessed him.”

“Look at his face, it isn’t human.”

“His body is like the fire at the end of time.”

Krishna sees how Bharadvaja’s son consumes common soldiers with devastras. He says quietly to Yudhishtira, “This man cannot be vanquished in battle; and if he isn’t killed soon, you will have no army left. Look at your precious guru. Where is his dharma, that he looses devastras at our common soldiers? He must die. And since all of you together cannot kill him, we must also use a little adharma to bring him down.”

Yudhishtira waits, uncomfortably. Krishna goes on, “Drona can only be killed if he lays down his bow. The only way he will do that is if we first break his heart. Then, perhaps, Dhrishtadyumna can keep his vow.”

The Dark One pauses, “If there is anyone the cold brahmana loves more than his life, it is his son. If he hears Aswatthama is dead, he will put down his bow.”

“But the son is hardly easier to kill than the father!” cries Arjuna.

“I only said that Drona must be told Aswatthama is dead.”

Arjuna is shocked. “Oh no!”

Bheema says, “If we don’t stop the Acharya, the war is lost. Have no doubt of that.”

They gaze out at Drona, the inferno, who will make ashes of their dreams and a waste of all their trials. Nakula and Sahadeva echo Bheema’s approval. But Yudhishtira is silent. Krishna waits, everyone waits for the eldest Pandava to speak. Then Bheema cries impatiently, “I will kill an elephant called Aswatthama and tell Drona his son is dead. So there will be no lie. Yudhishtira, you must allow me to do this! Look, he kills a thousand men each moment.”

A trembling Yudhishtira nods his head, consenting. Bheema rides off and kills the king of Malava’s war-elephant, Aswatthama, with a blow of his mace. He comes storming up to Drona and roars, “Aswatthama is dead! Aswatthama is dead!”

Drona sways in his chariot. Darkness films his eyes and his very life lurches in shock. But he says to himself, ‘Bheema is lying, no one can kill my son.’

The brahmana begins to fight again, twice as savagely as before. Once more, he invokes the brahmastra and now not against Arjuna. Drona looses the missile at the Panchala and Somaka legions! A flash of fire as if a volcano has erupted among helpless soldiers: flames tall as trees engulf those armies and fifty thousand men perish in an instant. Silence falls on Kurukshetra; the war will not last until dusk, if Drona is not stopped. Duryodhana's face is wreathed in a smile. At last, his Senapati fights as his king wants him to: now he would see how the Pandavas won this war.

But across the field, a subtle miracle is happening. Suddenly, Drona hears unearthly voices speaking to him from the air. When he looks up, astonished, he sees a host of shining beings materialized in the sky: only he saw them. Among those rishis³, the brahmana sees his dead father Bharadvaja. A cry escapes Drona's lips; in a moment, his eyes are full of tears.

The munis of Devaloka say, "You are not fighting with dharma, Drona; you burn men that know nothing of the astras with the brahmastra. Your time in the world has come to its end. Lay down your weapons now and prepare to die. Look, you see us with your mortal eyes. You are a brahmana, a master of the Vedas and Vedangas. This kshatriya's violent way is not for you. Enough now, Mahatman: cast away the cloak of darkness in which you have wrapped yourself. Turn your mind again to the Brahman, your time to die is here."

His father Bharadvaja says, "Put down your bow, my son. Your life on earth is over."

The vision fades from the sky and Drona stands stricken in his chariot. Some way off, he sees the man born to kill him: Dhrishtadyumna hacks his way through the Kaurava army to reach his master. Away to the right and nearer, Drona sees Yudhishtira. Another war raging within him now, Drona turns to the Pandava. Seeking a final reason to die, the guru cries to his sishya, "Is it true, Yudhishtira? Is Aswatthama dead?"

Drona knows Yudhishtira will never tell a lie. He never has in all his life, even as a child. Krishna had already said to Yudhishtira, "When the time comes, Drona will ask you if Aswatthama is dead. The future of the world will depend on what you say to him. If you don't tell this small white lie, the brahmana will fight on and in an hour or two you will have no army left. You will have the deaths of those who came to fight for you on your soul. But if you tell this small lie, I swear no blame will attach to you, no sin."

Seeing Drona ravage his legions, Yudhishtira had reluctantly agreed. So now, when Drona cries out his fateful question, Yudhishtira hesitates only a

moment before he replies, “Aswatthama is dead!” And adds under his breath, “The elephant Aswatthama.”

Yudhishtira was a man of such perfect dharma that his chariot never touched the earth but rode four fingers above it. Now, when he lied, his ratha descends to the ground and Dharma Deva’s son is like any other man in the mortal world.

Drona hears Yudhishtira and faints in his chariot. Every moment, Dhrishtadyumna battles his way nearer his Acharya. When Drona recovers, it seems his spirit is broken and the will to fight has all but left him. Dhrishtadyumna storms at him, his bow streaming; now the brahmana, who bestrode Kurukshetra a short while ago, fights back weakly, with effort. Drona’s hands have grown sluggish and hardly obey his will. Dhrishtadyumna harries him.

Yet the fight has not died in the Acharya; it only slumbers in grief. When the Panchala prince strikes him with arrows, the brahmana shakes off his stupor. Drona seizes up another bow, given him by his guru Angiras. He breaks Dhrishtadyumna’s weapon and covers him with fire. Dhrishtadyumna picks up another bow and fights back. But Drona is fear embodied, once more, his body is full of uncanny light. In a searing moment, he kills Dhrishtadyumna’s horses and his sarathy. He shatters the prince’s chariot.

Roaring himself, Dhrishtadyumna leaps down to the ground, sword in hand. He rushes at Drona. Coolly, the brahmana smashes his sword and shield and Dhrishtadyumna stands unarmed and helpless before his guru. A thin smile curving his lips, Drona raises his bow to kill the Panchala. From his quiver, he draws some arrows called vaitasmikas, meant specially for a powerful enemy who is very close. They are incendiary shafts and will steam away the armor from Dhrishtadyumna, before blowing him apart.

Of all the great archers only a few know anything about the vaitasmikas. They are more difficult to aim truly than any other arrow, because they are heavy and the bowstring must not be drawn back too far. Kripa is a master of them, as are Arjuna, Drona, Karna, Krishna, Pradyumna and Satyaki; Abhimanyu, also, was a master of the weighty shafts. Only one of those warriors is close enough to prevent Drona from killing Dhrishtadyumna.

His wrist cocked, Drona draws his bowstring back in the unusual manner used for the vaitasmikas. The Pandavas hold their breath. If Dhrishtadyumna is slain, who will kill Drona? In that interminable moment, the brahmana shoots his thick barbs, ten of them, one after the other. Dhrishtadyumna stands before him,

roaring, ready to die. At the very last sliver of a moment, before the vaitasmikas tear into the Panchala's breast, ten arrows flash out of nowhere, each one a savior and they cut down Drona's shafts in the air! Arjuna and Krishna shout aloud in relief. They turn to see Satyaki has saved Dhrishtadyumna's life.

Arjuna cries out Satyaki's name. He says to Krishna, "Satyaki is more than a brother to us! The war would have been lost in another moment."

Krishna murmurs, "It has not yet been won."

Arrows flow endlessly from Arjuna's Gandiva and he holds the Kaurava army off and away from Drona, just as he had on the day Bheeshma fell. On the other side, Satyaki does the same. The Kaurava warriors surround these two, but to no avail. Drona and Dhrishtadyumna still face each other.

As a flame blazes brightest just before it dies, so, too, does Drona on Kurukshetra. He fights more splendidly than ever, like a man of twenty. It is as if hearing his son is dead and seeing the rishis of Devaloka and his father have only made him more determined. He burns the Pandava army with astras, like a field of straw. He consumes twenty-four thousand kshatriyas; and, dissatisfied, rages on.

Once more, the terrible brahmana takes up the brahmastra. Dhrishtadyumna stands helpless on the ground, with no chariot and no means to contain the Kaurava Senapati. Then Bheema rides up like the wind, spirits him into his ratha and they attack Drona together. Fighting side by side, they cut down many of his missiles; but they can hardly put out the conflagration he is. Having beaten back the Kauravas on one flank, Satyaki rides up and he, too, turns his bow on Drona: not the three of them are enough to subdue him.

In disgust, Bheema leaps down from his chariot. Throwing caution to the winds, he runs to his old guru. He seizes Drona's chariot horses by their bridles, bringing them up. Drona pauses his hellish archery; he turns glowering to the lion that dares accost him. Bheema roars, "It is when the brahmana abandons his natural dharma that kshatriya kind is destroyed! The brahmana is meant to be gentle and compassionate, a home of all the virtues. You were born a brahmana, Drona, but you have become a butcher. You have strayed from your dharma and you have lost your mind. All the thousands you kill are kshatriyas, fighting as they were born to. But you were not born to this, which is why you burn helpless footsoldiers with devastras.

I know what turns your head, Brahmana. It is the gold Duryodhana gives you, isn't it? But what will you do with all that wealth, Drona, when your son for

whom you want it is dead? Murderer, how much you preached dharma to us when we were children. Is this that dharma you show us now?"

Bheema spits on the ground in contempt, turns his back on his guru and walks away fearlessly. His every word has struck Drona like an arrow. With his childlike directness, this pupil of his always had the power to wound his master. For he always spoke the truth, frankly and without blandishment. Now, Bheema's words push his Acharya over the edge, at which he already teetered. With a long roar, Drona flings his bow from him. The war pauses.

Drona cries in a ringing voice, "Karna, Duryodhana, Kripa: hear me! I will not fight any more. Drona's war has ended, the rest is left to you."

Drona sits on the floor of his chariot; he crosses his legs in padmasana. He shuts his eyes and yokes his spirit; in moments, he is lost to the battlefield around him, to the very world. Sunk in yoga, the brahmana journeys back on his anguish to the wellsprings of the eternal atman. Ancestral memory opens like a sacred flower in him. In relief, in gratitude, in joy, Drona discovers himself again.

Dhrishtadyumna sees him like that. Sword in hand, he leaps down from Bheema's chariot and runs at Drona. Arjuna watches him. Seeing that Drona was again their old guru whom they loved and worshipped once, the one who taught them so much, the Pandava cries, "Don't kill him, Dhrishtadyumna! Take him alive, don't kill him!"

But he cries in vain to a kshatriya whose father and sons Drona has killed. The Panchala springs lightly on to Drona's chariot. With a swing of his sword, he hews his Acharya's head from his neck in a blast of blood. Drona never opens his eyes; perhaps, he never knows when the sword-stroke ends his life. When the head is struck off, a blinding light, of a soul, issues from the naked throat and, pulsing and awesome, rises into heaven, lighting up the sky as it goes. In the subtle akasa above, the immortal rishis are still waiting for the brahmana. Drona walks among them now. He attains Brahmaloaka, a realm that the devas hardly know⁴.

Sanjaya, who has been blessed with mystic sight, sees the ascent of Drona's spirit. Besides him, just Kripa, Krishna and Yudhishtira see it. The rest of the field only sees how brutally Dhrishtadyumna hacks off Drona's head and stands drenched in his Acharya's blood. The Panchala picks up that head and leaps down from the gory chariot. With a roar, he flings it on the ground and stands smiling and panting, while the cheering Pandava soldiers throng him. The Pandava Senapati has killed the Kau-rava Senapati. He has accomplished the

impossible task for which he was born! But his father Dru-pada is not alive to see his son fulfil his destiny.

Bheema is the first to run up to Dhrishtadyumna and enfold him in a great embrace. Unmindful of the blood he is covered in, the blood of his master, Bheema roars, “You have kept your oath! I will hug you like this again when the sutaputra dies; and once more, when Duryodhana is killed.” Kurukshetra is alight with the news.

THIRTY-ONE

RECRIMINATIONS

At first, Duryodhana will not believe the news that streaks across Kurukshetra. The cry ‘Drona is dead!’ echoes everywhere and Kaurava soldiers run headlong from the field. Dropping their weapons, some peeling off their armor in terror, they fly on foot, on horseback and in their chariots. Even Karna, Shalya and Kripa flee.

When Duryodhana realizes the news is no empty rumor, his howl rings across the field, dismally. Again and again, he cries out his grief, his abysmal defeat; he cries out as if Dhrishtadyumna has hacked another limb from his body. Drona was the Kaurava’s great hope and hope had flared up when he saw how his master incinerated the Pandava army. He had been convinced the war would end before dusk and victory would be his. But now...ah, how could a man who fought so luminously just moments ago, have laid down his bow and allowed Dhrishtadyumna to lop off his head? It would have been more likely that the ocean dried up, or that Meru stood on his crown. Then, through the panic, the story of how the Pandavas deceived Drona filters. Gripped by the mood of his army, Duryodhana also turns his horses and dashes from battle.

Suddenly, ahead of him he hears a voice that brings him up short, “Duryodhana, what happened? Karna, you look as if the war is already lost! Who is dead that you panic like this? How can you run from the field, when Drona is your Senapati?”

Duryodhana stands mute. Aswatthama cries again, “Tell me, who died?”

Not for a moment does any suspicion of the truth cross his mind. His father is invincible; who can kill Drona? Duryodhana turns imploringly to Kripa and says in a whisper, “I beg you, Acharya, tell him. I cannot.”

Gently, Kripa breaks the news to Aswatthama. He tells him how the Pandavas lied to Drona, how even Yudhishtira lied. He tells the son how his father laid down his weapons and yoked himself in dhyana. Finally, he tells him how Dhrishtadyumna leapt on to Drona’s chariot and struck off his head. Aswatthama grows very still; for a moment, it seems he has turned to stone. But his eyes are terrible and a ripple of fear shimmers through the Kaurava legions when they sense his fury.

He does not break down, he doesn’t even cry. Quietly, he says, “There was

no other way they could have killed him and they will die for what they have done. War is a fearsome thing, that it can make even Yudhishtira abandon dharma. I could have borne his death, if my father had been killed honorably. This is intolerable. Drona is in Devaloka now, because he died a hero's death; but those who killed him shall find hell before the sun sets today. Dhrishtadyumna will not live, nor Yudhishtira.

Now he raises his voice, so all the army hears him. "Duryodhana, I have an astra that not Arjuna, Krishna, Bheema or Yudhishtira will resist. It is a weapon never used against common soldiers and I did not summon it. Vishnu himself once gave my father the narayanastra and Drona gave it to me. In this world, only I have that ayudha and I mean to avenge my father with it today. Duryodhana, my friend, let us return to battle. I will make you lord of the earth in a few moments!"

The Kaurava legions rally round Aswatthama. Conches resound, horns are blown, drums beaten and Duryodhana's army wheels into battle again. Across Kurukshetra, the celebrating Pandavas hear the conches and horns. They see the cloud of dust where the Kaurava chariots, horses and footsoldiers surge toward them again. Above the rest of the distant din, they hear one voice roaring.

Standing among his brothers, Yudhishtira says, "A moment ago they fled in terror and now they have turned around and come back to fight. Fresh hope stirs them and I hear one voice raised like a tiger's above every other. Whose is it?"

Arjuna says grimly, "It is Aswatthama coming to avenge his father. Yudhishtira, you lied to have our guru's life; now who will save us from his son? Aswatthama was born by Siva's blessing; no one can save you from him, Dhrishtadyumna. I was not for it, Yudhishtira: what we did was adharma and we will pay for it with our lives. For greed of a kingdom, my brother, you told the lie that killed our master. It would have been better to abandon the war, than do this shameful thing. Our sin is three-fold: of killing a brahmana, an elder who loved us like a father and a guru. We have forsaken the truth and now we will die!"

Arjuna stands trembling, as a stunned silence follows his outburst. Then, his eyes turning red in a moment, Bheema growls, "Such fine words, Arjuna! You speak like a vaanaprastha who has renounced the world. But I don't like what you say. Are you a brahmana that you speak like this? You are Arjuna, who can subdue the earth with your astras! Then why do you talk like a priest, whose only glory is his humility? You disgust me. And how dare you accuse Yudhishtira of adharma? Answer me!"

Bheema's reaction is so ferocious that Arjuna is taken aback. He stands confused and makes no reply. Bheema has not finished, "Aren't we here to fight a war? Were we not cheated and humiliated? Was all that was done to us dharma? When we were exiled, when that animal dragged Draupadi into the Kuru sabha and tried to strip her? Answer me, Arjuna! Didn't you once say that we must fight to avenge ourselves? And now you whine about dharma to our brother: to Yudhishtira who spent thirteen years like a beggar for dharma's sake! Yudhishtira, emperor of the earth, who lived like a common courtier in Virata's palace and did not protest when that king flung his dice at him as if he was his slave. Answer me, Arjuna!" roars Bheema.

"Wasn't it dharma for which Yudhishtira agreed to take five towns from Duryodhana, to sue for peace? And this is the man you accuse of being greedy for a kingdom and of killing his guru with treachery. Are you blind that you didn't see how Drona burnt our legions with his astras? Are you witless, that the great Arjuna does not realize how all we have suffered and everything we have fought for would have been in vain, if Drona was not killed? You have courage to stand there and accuse Yudhishtira!

Abhimanyu was killed by treachery and most of those responsible are still alive. Karna humiliated me on the field and he still lives. And suddenly, instead of doing what he is meant to, fighting the war, here is Arjuna preaching dharma to his older brother. And singing Aswatthama's praises. 'He was born by Siva's blessing. Who can save us from him?' I say to you, Bheema will smash Aswatthama down with his mace!

Arjuna, you have gone too far today. You have insulted the one who drives your chariot. Look where he stands, smiling so tolerantly. He is the Lord! He asked Yudhishtira to lie to Drona. Who are you that you know more about dharma than Krishna does? You are a kshatriya, a warrior. Just that. It would be better if you left matters of dharma to those who really know about these things. You are no rishi, brother: remember that before you preach to your betters!"

Still glowering, Bheema falls silent. With a cry, Yudhishtira embraces him.

Dhrishtadyumna bristles, "Arjuna, you say that I killed a brahmana. How was Drona a brahmana any more? Do you know what a brahmana is, that you preach to me? He must perform yagnas, he must be a teacher and always a student as well. How was Drona a brahmana? He taught, but no Veda. He studied, but not the Shastras. And what was the yagna he performed? He sacrificed a million lives in the flames of his astras! And for whom was this offering? For no God, Arjuna, but for a demon called Duryodhana. Why, even as

a warrior, Drona was an adharmi. Who else would use the devastras against ordinary soldiers? He was bloodthirsty, arrogant and merciless.

Besides, we all know I was born to kill him. Didn't we come here to fight a war? Haven't I been following Drona like his shadow, for fifteen days? Didn't you know that I meant to kill him? Now that I have, you blame me, instead of embracing me in joy that I have rid you of your most powerful enemy. This is strange indeed, Arjuna!

If you speak of dharma, tell me, did you kill Jayadratha in perfect dharma? Wasn't the sun hidden before you cut away his head? Or is that not deceit, because Arjuna is the one whom it helped? You killed Jayadratha because you lost one son. Drona killed my father, my brothers and all my sons. I have avenged myself on a murderer and I feel no remorse. I have saved the lives of thousands of men whom the demented brahmana would have made ashes with his astras. And I swear I am the happiest man alive!"

Arjuna makes no reply and Dhrishtadyumna rages on, "You say a kshatriya should not kill an elder. Wasn't Bhagadatta an elder, wasn't he your father Pandu's friend? You say a kshatriya shouldn't kill his guru, or someone who is like a father to him. What about Bheeshma? I did not see your hand falter at your bowstring, when Bheeshma laid his weapons down. Or, perhaps, he wasn't your Pitama and far more a father to you than the wretched Drona? So what are you saying? That if Arjuna kills an elder that is no sin, but if Dhrishtadyumna does, it is." Dhrishtadyumna cries, "Draupadi is my sister and her sons are my nephews. Or I swear I would kill you for what you have dared say to me today!"

Satyaki cries, "Dare you speak to Arjuna like this! You have done a vile thing before all these noble men, Dhrishtadyumna; and you dare turn on Arjuna? Not only do you kill your master, when he sits in dhyana with no weapon in his hand, you cut his head from his body and fling it down on the ground! How does Bheeshma's fall compare with Drona's death? The Pitama asked to be killed, but not Drona. Besides, your brother Shikhandi shot Bheeshma first, not Arjuna. Not another word from you, coward, or I will crush your head!"

Satyaki stands growling, mace in hand. Dhrishtadyumna laughs in the Yadava's face. He says coolly, "We are fighting this war on the same side and so perhaps I should forgive you, Satyaki. But this is passing strange, that you of all people preach to me! Yadava, was it dharma when you killed Bhoorishravas? Hadn't he given up the war, didn't he sit in dhyana? That was such a noble thing you did! After Arjuna cut off his arm and he was helpless, the great Satyaki cut off Bhoorishravas' head. And you dare accuse me!

Listen to me, Yadava. We are here to fight a dharma yuddha. We are here to put down a tide of evil, which chokes the earth. We are here to crush the Kauravas. At times, fire must be fought with fire. You killed Bhoorisravas when he was helpless; but you had an old feud with him and this is war. So we said nothing to you. In war, particularly, dharma is hard to define and adharma too. The final dharma in war is to prevail over the enemy. All of us are here because we believe the cause of the Pandavas is the cause of truth and that they have been grievously wronged.

Yudhishtira has never told a lie in his life, because he holds truth more sacrosanct than anything. Yet, when he saw how Drona burned our men with devastras, he sacrificed his truth for his soldiers' lives. You know as well as I that if the Acharya had not been stopped, he would have killed us all and cremated our cause with us. Better than anyone, you know what it is to inherit an old feud. You killed Bhoorisravas because of such a feud. Because of such a feud, Drona killed my father and my sons; and I killed him. But it seems you have one dharma to judge what Arjuna and you do and another to judge me. I cannot kill Arjuna because he is my sister's husband, but no such bond prevents me from killing you. Come, Yadava, let me see how you crush my head!"

Satyaki needs no encouragement. He runs at Dhrishtadyumna, with his mace raised. Bheema leaps down from his chariot and flings his arms around Satyaki. Even Bheema is dragged along a full five paces, but on the sixth he stops the Yadava, who struggles furiously but is helpless against the iron clasp in which the wind's son holds him.

Krishna, Arjuna and Sahadeva intervene. Tears in his eyes, Sahadeva cries, "Now we are at each other's throats. Stop it! I beg you, Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna, stop this madness. And you two are such friends. Satyaki, you are like Krishna to us and Dhrishtadyumna is as dear as his sister is. Bhoorisravas and Drona are both dead and we are forgetting we are standing on a field of war! Embrace each other now and forget the harsh things you said."

Krishna and Yudhishtira add their voices to Sahadeva's. But it is the arrival of the Kaurava army, led now by Aswatthama, which sobers the Panchala and the Yadava. Together, they turn to face the enemy again.

THIRTY-TWO

NARAYANA STRA

As they watch the Kaurava army flow at them across Kurukshetra, Yudhishtira turns to Arjuna. In a sad, strained voice he says, “I want a word with you, my brother. You say I am responsible for the death of our guru, who you claim loved us like a father. Yes, I told the lie that made Drona lay down his bow. But as for him loving us like a guru or a father, was it because of his love that he trapped Abhimanyu in the chakra vyuha, where six maharathikas killed our child? Was it love for us that tied his tongue, when Dusasana dragged Panchali into the Kuru sabha? Love that made him swear he would fight for Duryodhana if there was a war? That made him burn our soldiers with his astras and loose the brahmastra at you? And even when he finally laid down his weapons, he cried out a warning to Duryodhana.”

Yudhishtira speaks tensely, with uncommon pique in his voice. “Arjuna, you may still think of Drona as your guru. For me he lost that place in my heart some time ago. A man should have only one guru, who does indeed love him like a son. Krishna is my guru and I have no other. Yes, for the first time in my life I told a lie. I lied at the instance of my guru Krishna. I lied to save the lives of thousands of men who depend on me, who risk their lives for me. Arjuna, I am proud of my lie! I would never have told it, if I was to regret it after I had. That isn’t my nature.”

Arjuna has no answer to this. But now, the Kaurava army is within striking distance and immediately Aswatthama summons the narayanastra and shoots it at the enemy. The earth shakes, the sky seems to catch fire and a malefic star hangs over the Pandava army as an inferno. Towering flames flash down from the astra, ashing legions whole. A hundred thousand arrows whistle down from that ayudha every moment, reaping as many lives. Whining chakras whirl out from its blinding heart and scythe through Yudhishtira’s forces in unimaginable violence. The Pandavas train their own arrows on the dreadful thing; the narayanastra only blazes more fiercely with each shaft they shoot at it. Other weird weapons scream down: tornadoes of flames of a hundred colors.

Yudhishtira panics. “Run, my friends, run! Dhrishtadyumna, take your army and ride home: the war is lost. Satyaki, fly back to Dwaraka! My brothers, run while you still have your lives. I must stay and let the astra kill me. Let that be my penance for killing my Acharya.”

But above the screams of the dying, another voice roars, “The narayanastra grows fiercer when it is resisted. Lay down your weapons and prostrate yourselves before Vishnu’s ayudha. Worship the astra and it will grow mild.”

Krishna’s word flashes across Kurukshetra. In moments, every Pandava soldier has flung his weapons down and lies flat on his face before the apocalypse in the sky. At once, the astra grows quiet, it dims itself at being worshipped. But one kshatriya has not put down his weapons. He stands alone and defiant in his chariot, roaring, “I am no coward to bow to Aswatthama’s astra. I will stand against it, even if no one else ever has!”

Blasting on his conch, Bheema rides at the Kaurava army. Erupting again in wrath, the narayanas-tra turns its fires on Bheema. A thousand fulminant arrows flash down out of the sky on just his chariot. Roaring like a pride of lions, Bheema turns his bow on Aswatthama, by whose will the astra hangs fire. Hardly has he drawn them from his quiver, the power of the astra burns up his shafts in his hands. A rain of fire pours down from the astra. Light-like arrows, keening chakras flame down at the kshatriya who stands alone against Vishnu’s weapon on Kurukshetra. Bheema looks like a mountain covered by fireflies. He stands roaring his defiance, that wild son of Vayu!

The astra sets Bheema’s chariot and horses alight. It engulfs him in a sheet of flames, until he is like a Deva materialized at the heart of a yagna fire. Now there seem to be two uncanny suns risen on Kurukshetra: one the astra above and the other Bheema in his burning chariot. He will not give in. His roars ring louder than ever on the field of dharma. Arjuna jumps up and invokes the varunastra. But when he shoots it at Bheema’s ratha, that weapon, which can drown Kurukshetra in a flash flood, turns to steam.

There is only one way to stop Bheema from killing himself. Krishna and Arjuna leap down from their chariot and run to him. Plunging through white flames, they jump on him. Before Bheema realizes what they are doing, they wrest his weapons from him. He roars louder still. They drag him out of the chariot, fling him down on the ground and themselves beside him. He struggles desperately, but they hold him down on his face.

When the last kshatriya is on the ground, the narayanastra grows mild again. Like a majestic comet, the weapon passes over the supine Pandava army and on out of the world. The air on Kurukshetra is cool again. Healing breezes blow across fate’s field. Still, no soldier rises for fear. Then Krishna is on his feet, crying, “It has passed. You can get up now.”

Bheema staggers up, still furious. Krishna turns on him and says sharply,

“Was it to win the war that you were trying to get yourself killed?”

There is something in his eyes and his voice, with which not even Bheema dares argue.

Across Kurukshetra, Duryodhana sees the narayanastra passing and turns eagerly to Aswatthama, “Again, Aswatthama: summon it again! They have no answer to the narayanastra.”

The crestfallen Aswatthama says, “Krishna knew the answer to the narayanastra, or their army would have been ashes by now. No matter: they fell on their faces to beg for their lives. They have acknowledged defeat, which for a kshatriya is worse than death. From now on, they live in shame. I am satisfied.”

Duryodhana growls, “But not I! Call the astra again and this time let it consume them.”

“The narayanastra can be summoned only once. If I call it again, it will consume not the enemy but us.”

“You command so many astras. Summon them all today, Aswatthama! Your father is dead; we depend on you now. Burn the Pandavas, I must see them die.”

Aswatthama charges at the Pandava host. Dhrishtadyumna rides against him first. They fight, without pausing to draw breath. Drona’s frenzied son strikes Dhrishtadyumna with twenty arrows, in a single moment. Dhrishtadyumna faints in his chariot. By the time he recovers, Aswatthama has killed his sarathy and horses.

Luckily for the Panchala, Satyaki rides up just then. The Yadava cuts down Aswatthama’s horses and sarathy, even as Drona’s son flies up to avenge himself on his father’s killer. Duryodhana, Kripa and Karna surround Aswatthama. They have another chariot brought out to the hero of the hour. Like a tiger robbed of his prey, Aswatthama rushes again at Satyaki. Once more, the cool Yadava shoots down his horses and sarathy.

Yet another chariot is fetched for Aswatthama and he rages from it. He calls out with a laugh to Satyaki, “Yadava, I know how much you love the Panchala prince! But today, neither of you will escape me.”

Satyaki is overwhelmed by a cataract of arrows. He has his bow sliced in slivers and it seems Aswatthama will kill him. Then, five Pandavas ride from five sides to form a ring around their Yadava, as if they guarded their own lives. Yudhishtira and the twins take Satyaki to safety, while Bheema engages Drona’s son. Not for long: Aswatthama kills Bheema’s sarathy with a naracha and the

Pandava's horses career across Kurukshetra.

Now Arjuna roars at his boyhood friend, his master's son, "I have heard so much about your valor, Aswatthama! I have heard how powerful you are, how wise, how fearless: how you are truly your father's son. I know how much you love the sons of Dhritarashtra and hate the sons of Pandu. Come now, show me your courage!"

Aswatthama replies with a smoking, thought-like fusillade. They fight as if in another dimension: the son and the finest sishya of the dead Acharya. The rest of the war pauses around them, to gaze. They are so evenly matched and they duel as if to settle which of them is Drona's best pupil. Aswat-thama has long harbored a secret envy of Arjuna; and, today, with his father slain, he means to prove that he is better than the Pandava.

Drona's son invokes the agneyastra and shoots it at the Pandava army. In a moment, night falls on Kurukshetra. The weapon of the Fire God flames into the sky and, hanging low, vomits five meteors that immolate five columns of helpless footsoldiers in an eyeflash. Black smoke and the stench of burning flesh envelop the field of death. Plaintive screams ring across Kurukshetra and it seems the battleground has plunged down into the last pit of hell. The son emulates his father's rage; he defies every law of dharma. Watching from a distance, Duryodhana exults.

At the heart of night, in the thick of fear, Arjuna invokes a brahmastra, which subdues every other astra. It streaks from his bow. Instantly, the murky darkness of the agneyastra evaporates. The air is clear again and cool. An icy gale springs up and sweeps across Kurukshetra, blowing the weapon of fire out of the sky. Around Arjuna's chariot the charred remains of thousands of his men, almost an aksauhini, bear gruesome witness to the power of Agni; but Arjuna and his dark sarathy are unsinged.

For a long moment, Aswatthama stands trembling at his failure. Then, with a howl, he flings down his bow, leaps from his chariot and dashes madly from the field. Helplessly, Duryodhana and his army watch him go. Like one pursued by demons, Aswatthama dashes across Kurukshetra and plunges into the forest beyond: never turning back, running on and on as if for his life. Tears stream from his eyes and roars of grief and rage issue from his lips. On he runs, not knowing where he runs to, nor caring, only bellowing his despair to the trees, the earth, the astonished beasts.

Abruptly, a dark figure looms in his path. Panting, Aswatthama stops his flight. He flings himself, sobbing, at the feet of the rishi Vyasa. Drona's son

wails, “The astras failed me! Why, Muni, why?¹”

Vyasa lays a kindly hand on the brahmana warrior’s head. He says, “You summoned them against Nara Narayana, my child. What can any astra do against those two? The fault is not yours, or the weapons’. Krishna and Arjuna have come into the world to cleanse it: what force can stand in the way of their grace? Why, by their grace, your father is in Devaloka now. He is at peace and you have nothing to grieve about. Go back; it isn’t dharma to run from battle. You have come here to risk everything for Duryodhana. You must not abandon him now, when he needs you most.”

Vyasa vanishes before the kneeling Aswatthama. Slowly, Drona’s son rises; he wipes his eyes. Soft peace has fallen on his heart to hear that his father is in heaven. Aswatthama turns back to Kurukshetra. It is twilight, when he arrives in the Kaurava camp. The day’s battle has ended; the armies have withdrawn. Only the dead lie on the black field, while jackals and hyenas begin to tear away their flesh in burning mouthfuls.

In Duryodhana’s camp and Yudhishtira’s, common soldiers fall gratefully into sleep. So ends the fifteenth day of the war: a fateful day, when Drona, who had stood like a fortress, fell. In the early part of the night, Duryodhana is sunk in despair; he will neither eat nor say a word. Red-eyed and grim, he sits in his tent with Aswatthama, Karna, Dusasana, Shalya, Shakuni and some others. He drinks often and deeply from the flagon of wine at his side. Not all the wine in the world can change the truth that Bheeshma has fallen and Drona is slain. Defeat stares Duryodhana in the face; and death.

BOOK EIGHT

KARNA PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

SENAPATI KARNA

Late that night in Duryodhana's tent, the Kaurava asks heavily, "What do we do now? Tell me what you think."

A moment's uncertain silence, then, Aswatthama says, "We must not lose heart, my lord. What you need is a new Senapati to lead us into battle tomorrow: a warrior that loves you, to whom we can all look up. To my mind, the choice is obvious. Though all of us are ready to die for you, there is no archer among us like Karna. Let him be your general and we can still win this war."

The others agree. A wan smile lights Duryodhana's strained face. He embraces Karna and says, "My friend, there is no archer on earth like you. This is my moment of crisis and only you can help me. Pitama and the Acharya led our legions splendidly; both were killed when they had laid down their weapons. Yet, my grandfather and my master did not fight as they might have, or these Pandavas would never have stood against our numbers. The war should have ended ten days ago. But Bheeshma and Drona loved the sons of Pandu, they would never fight them as just another enemy."

He pauses: this argument is more for himself than anyone else. "Now, for the first time, we will have a Senapati who detests the simpering Pandavas as much as I do. Karna, I leave everything in your hands. I won't have to goad you each day to do your best and you will lead us to victory. At dawn tomorrow, you will be like Karttikeya leading the army of Devaloka! It is your destiny, take command of the Kuru army."

This is typical of Duryodhana: that, in a moment, his mood swings from despair to elation, for which there is hardly cause. Karna stands before his friend, for whom he will give his life. Softly he says, "Nothing will please me more, my lord. I will kill Arjuna and the world will be yours. Have no doubt, tomorrow Arjuna will die."

Priests are summoned and holy water is fetched in urns of gold and earthen ones, in the tuks and horns of the elephant, the rhinoceros and the bull—water sanctified with mantras. Duryodhana seats Karna on a throne made of udumbara wood, covered in silk. He ties the auspicious thread around Karna's wrist, drenches him with the water, himself, in midnight consecration and the sutaputra, Suryaputra, is Senapati of the Kuru army. This is the nearest Kunti's

eldest son will come to becoming the king he might have been. Duryodhana convinces himself that the war, so far, has been a trial of his endurance. After all, they were fighting for the throne of the earth: such a prize will not come easily, but only after a man was purified by an ordeal. Duryodhana does not think of Yudhishtira's ordeal; and, of course, he has no inkling that his new general is the Pandavas' brother. The Kaurava is content to believe that, now, his own destiny would be fulfilled.

Dawn of the sixteenth day of war; Karna arrays his legions in the makara vyuha. He sets himself at the head of the phalanx of the crocodile, at its snout. The eyes of the beast of war are Shakuni and Uluka, with their troops around them. The crown of the makara's head is Aswatthama, renewed, eager for battle. Duryodhana's brothers are immediately behind Aswatthama, in a fierce cohort. At the very heart of the phalanx, protected by thronging legions all around, is Duryodhana himself, his chariot fluttering the black and gold serpent banner. The forelegs of the massive reptile are Kritavarman, with the Narayana warriors and his own Bhoja legion¹ and Kripa and his company. The hind-legs are Karna's son Sushena and the redoubtable Shalya, with their soldiers.

Across the field, Yudhishtira gazes at the Kaurava phalanx being formed. He turns to Arjuna in the dawn breeze and says, "They have a new Senapati. Karna shines at their head like a moon in a sky full of stars. And now, seeing them again in the same makara vyuha our Pitama used, I realize how they have dwindled these sixteen days. And we with them.

Can we restore these millions of lives by winning the war? A generation of noble kshatriyas has perished on this field of our fathers; the world will never be the same again. Bheeshma and Drona have fallen. To my mind, Karna is the last great soldier they have and he is the most dangerous one. More than Pitama or the Acharya, I fear Karna. Arjuna, if you can kill this man and only you can, victory will be ours."

Arjuna and Dhrishtadyumna form their legions in the chandrakala vyuha. Bheema is the left point of the crescent moon and Dhrishtadyumna the right. At the heart of the vyuha is Arjuna himself, with Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva around him. At Arjuna's chariot-wheels are Yuddhamanyu and Uttamaujas and, flaring out in a curve on either side of the four Pandavas, the rest of their soldiers. It is a leaner crescent, by far, than the one they formed two weeks ago: fifteen lifetimes ago, to those that fought the war.

When both armies are ready, their conch-blowers and drummers sound a storm to begin the day's bloodletting. The armies charge each other, weapons

glinting in the early light of morning. Karna leads the Kaurava army with dignity; he returns the war to Bheeshma's dharma yuddha. This is a relief to all, after Drona's vicious command. Though Karna fights with dharma, the Kauravas recover spirit under his lead; for he straddles Kurukshetra like a Deva.

Bheema opens the day's slaughter by striking off the arrogant lord of Kshemadhurti's head. Then, Karna is at the Pandava army. Nakula dashes up to confront him, killing a hundred Kaurava soldiers as he goes. Away to the left, Bheema and Aswatthama meet in a glittering duel. Satyaki faces two of the surviving Kekaya brothers. As the armies flow into each other, on wavelets of blood, Duryodhana and Yudhishtira come face to face. The remnants of the Samsaptakas ride at Arjuna, only at him, for revenge. Kripa and Dhrishtadyumna face each other, Shikhandi and Kritavarman, Srutakirti and Shalya. Sahadeva and Dusasana duel.

Blood flies everywhere, spraying freely. Limbs and heads, struck off, lie severed from their trunks. Dismembered bodies fall, spasming in death's throes and the air is a hoarseness of screams and roars. After an exhilarating encounter, Satyaki kills the Kekayas. Part of the morning's glory belongs to Draupadi's sons, who range the field in a small patrol of their own, fleet and ruthless. Fighting well above himself, Bheema strikes Aswatthama unconscious and the brahmana is borne off the field by his sarathy. Shalya puts Srutakirti to flight and Sahadeva shames Dusasana.

Nakula fights his way through a hundred men to face Karna, who rides to meet his charge, with a familiar, mocking, smile on his lips. Nakula cries, "Evil one, you are the cause of this war. You are the outsider who stoked hatred between cousins. I will kill you now, Karna and pluck a thorn from my heart."

The smile never leaves Karna's face. He says smoothly, "You are a fine kshatriya indeed, Nakula. But let me shear your pride a little."

Nakula replies with a buzz of arrows. But Karna is quicker than the mind; he splits the Pandava's bow; in a blur, Nakula seizes up another and divides Karna's weapon. Karna also picks up another bow and fights back; and now he is truly awesome. After Bheema and Sahadeva, today it is Nakula's turn to be humbled by the lord of Anga. Karna shatters his brother's bow again; he kills his horses and his sarathy. Another scorching volley smashes Nakula's chariot.

Sword in hand, Nakula leaps down to the ground. Hardly have his feet touched the earth, when his blade is struck from his grasp, superbly. Next moment, his shield is smashed in shards. When the Pandava lifts his mace from the ruins of his ratha, that, too, is pulverized. Nakula wrenches a chariot-wheel

from its axle. Smiling, Karna cuts the wheel in slivers with a wizardry of silver shafts.

His enemy laughs in the defenseless Pandava's face. Nakula loses his nerve; he turns and runs. He does not go five paces, when Karna rides up beside him and brings him up roughly by snaring his head in his bowstring! Like a fisherman his catch, he hauls the Pandava back to him. Nakula stands shaking.

Karna says cruelly, "What happened, little one? Lost your tongue, O Kshatriya?"

Nakula squirms. Karna holds him firm, the bowstring around his throat. He has not finished. "Don't be ashamed, Nakula. I promise you, one day you will remember this duel and feel proud that you once fought Karna and escaped with your life! Here, I gift you your life, child. Run away now. Go."

He lifts the bow away from Nakula's neck. Nakula runs from his tormentor. Hissing like a serpent, in shame, he runs to Yudhishtira's chariot. Only Krishna notices, from a way off, the wistfulness in Karna's eyes.

TWO

MANY DUELS

Karna bestrides Kurukshetra, a white flame, an incarnation of the living sun. Like Surya Deva over the earth at high noon, the sutaputra shines on Kurukshetra. Emboldened by him, the other Kaurava warriors begin to fight as never before.

Shakuni's son, Uluka, routs Yuyutsu. Shakuni himself battles Sutasoma; and in rage at how Drona died, Kripa confronts Dhrishtadyumna. The Acharya fights as well as his slain brother-in-law and Dhrishtadyumna cannot face him at all. Kripa strikes him unconscious in his chariot. Dhrish-tadyumna's sarathy bears his prince out of the battle. But crimson-eyed Kripa rides after him, determined to avenge death with death. This brahmana is fearsome today, as he hasn't been so far.

Some way off, Shikhandi and Kritavarman duel and the inspired Yadava lacerates the Panchala. Shikhandi is almost struck out of his chariot by Kritavarman, but saves himself by clinging to his flag-post at the last moment, before he faints. His sarathy rushes him out of battle. Not far from one another, like three fires from Siva's trident they rage: Kritavarman, Kripa and Karna. They kill thousands.

The Samsaptakas foolishly challenge Arjuna again. Seeing them reminds him of the day Abhi-manyu died and he lets them feel his wrath. The few he leaves alive, flee. Duryodhana and Yudhishtira come face to face: the lords of the two armies. Seeing how Karna rules Kurukshetra gives heart to the Kaurava and he fights like ten men. The war would be won if he can kill Yudhishtira.

But his cousin, the Pandava, is here for dharma. After a brief, refulgent duel, Yudhishtira looses four arrows like one in the heart of a moment. Duryodhana's horses fall, shot through their hearts. Yudhishtira's fifth shaft takes his sarathy's head from his neck, spraying Duryodhana with the man's blood. The sixth cuts his serpent-banner down; the seventh strikes the bow from his hand. Yudhishtira's archery is elegant, effortless and the armies gaze at him.

Roaring, Duryodhana draws his sword, but the Pandava's eighth arrow breaks it in two. Then, five arrows in a stream fling the Kaurava back against his flagstaff. Only the armor Drona gave him saves Duryodhana's life. Yudhishtira raises his bow to end the war; like three wishes Karna, Aswatthama and Kripa

appear to hold him off. The Pandava's own kshatriyas arrive to join the fray and the battle spreads out again. But the moral victory belongs to Yudhishtira; he has the pleasure of seeing rage and shame on his cousin's face.

The sun has begun to fall from his zenith and afternoon finds the Kaurava army melting before Bheema. He kills thousands and his roars resound above every other noise on Kurukshetra: above the whinnying of horses, the yells of kshatriyas, the whistling of a million arrows and, most of all, the piteous screams of those cut down.

Duryodhana mounts a fresh chariot and rides at Yudhishtira again. But the tide of dharma flows against the Kaurava and, once more, he finds swift humiliation. Yudhishtira casts a javelin at him and strikes him down. His new sarathy rides away with his king dazed on the floor of his ratha.

When Arjuna has inflicted sharp defeat on Aswatthama and Kritavarman, who challenged him, he turns on Karna. But Karna is invincible. He wounds both Arjuna and Krishna with some astounding archery, arrows like flights of bees and the other Pandavas rally round the white chariot. The sixteenth day of the dharma yuddha wears on and surely by now there is more death than life on yawning Kurukshetra. The sun slips to the horizon. Fearful that they may be asked to fight in the night, again, the soldiers on both sides begin to leave the field even before the signal is given to end the day's battle.

Karna and Dhrishtadyumna order the twilight conches to sound and the armies are formally withdrawn. It has been a day when tens of thousands perished on both sides, but no kshatriya among them. The names of those thousands remain unknown, unrecorded; though, surely, they gave their most precious possession on the field of battle. This has always been the way of war, why, of life itself: that fame is an ornament worn by the few.

There is no elation or dejection in either camp. The honors of the day have been shared almost equally, even if the Kauravas have perhaps had the slight edge, because of Karna. After Drona's frantic command, the war has been restored to an even tenor. With Karna, the Kaurava soldiers feel as if Bheeshma led them again and the Pandava legions are relieved as well.

THREE

THE LUCID NIGHT

Duryodhana has not had the satisfaction of seeing Karna kill Arjuna. He had seen how Karna had Nakula at his mercy and spared the Pandava's life: he says nothing about these to his friend. Bheeshma and Drona he would have accused of being partial to the Pandavas, but he can never utter a harsh word to Karna. Moreover, the Kaurava is convinced Karna is as disappointed as he is that Arjuna remains alive.

After the day's battle, just when they are about to retire to their tents for the evening ablutions, Karna takes his king's hand and says, "Arjuna fights magnificently, but tomorrow I will kill him."

Duryodhana embraces his Senapati. "You will, Karna, I know you will."

Late that night, Karna comes alone to Duryodhana's tent. Complete certainty is upon him that this will be his last night in the world. He is calm and as always, they plan the next day's strategy together. Then, Karna leans forward and says in his intense way, "There is only one way this war can be won. Tomorrow, my friend, I will either kill Arjuna, or die in the attempt. Duryodhana, tomorrow the world will see, once and forever, who its best archer is.

Both he and I have astras we can summon, of the four kinds. He has the Gandiva, renowned in the corners of the world; but my Vijaya, which Bhargava gave me, is the greater weapon. What few men know is that Viswakarma once made the Vijaya for Indra and the king of the Devas gave my master the bow. My prince, tomorrow, with Arjuna dead, the world will lie at your feet."

He pauses, frowning. Duryodhana says, "Something disturbs you, Karna?"

"Yes. One must not underestimate one's adversary. Arjuna's silver quivers are magical, inexhaustible. His chariot is unearthly and his horses are gandharva steeds. He has Hanuman's blessing. Have you observed his banner? Hanuman emblazoned on it is alive: I have seen his eyes watch the war, I have heard him roar! And then, of course, there is the most telling advantage Arjuna has, the one without which he would have long since been dead: Krishna is his sarathy. You have seen him drive those horses, Duryodhana. He is like the mind, quicker. Every time our arrows fly straight for Arjuna's throat or his heart, suddenly we find him gone from where he was a moment ago. Krishna has spirited him away.

I have no sarathy to match Krishna. All else being equal, even if I am the better archer, how can I kill the Pandava when the Dark One guides his horses?”

Duryodhana asks, “Is there no one in our army who can match Krishna as a sarathy?”

“There is one man. But will he agree to be a sutaputra’s charioteer?”

“Who is he, Karna?”

Karna says, “Shalya. He is twice the sarathy Krishna is. Shalya is to charioteers what Karna is among archers! Krishna knows the aswahridaya, but Shalya is a master of the arcane art. If Shalya will drive my horses tomorrow, Arjuna will not escape with his life. But Shalya is a king and proud; it will not be easy to persuade him. Yet, there is no one on earth like Duryodhana to persuade any man. The very war may depend on it.”

Duryodhana says, “He won’t refuse me, Karna! Shalya shall drive your horses. Now go and sleep, you must be fresh for tomorrow. It will be your great day and the world will know that not Arjuna but peerless Karna is its finest bowman: and that he won the war for Duryodhana. What could be more fitting? Only so you could win the world for me, Bheeshma has fallen and Drona has died!”

Tears in their eyes, they embrace again. Karna lingers on in Duryodhana’s tent. How many nights they have spent talking and drinking into the small hours: baring their souls to each other. Tonight, Karna knows, will be the last one. For a while he stays on, chatting of this and that, of the times they have shared. Then, reluctantly, he rises to go. He walks to the tent-flap and turns back to clasp Duryodhana again. They hold each other for a long moment, before Karna breaks away and strides out into the darkness.

Visions of the past fill the night for Karna, alone in his tent. He sees his life vividly before his eyes; and he has no doubt that tomorrow he will die. He sees his mother Radha, his tender years with her. He lies quietly in the dark and allows himself to be borne away on the crystal tide of memories. At last, those memories have no power to hurt him. He is a serene witness to his own past: almost as if he watched another man’s life being played out before his eyes.

Then, the anxiety of what he has sworn to do snatches him back from calm. Karna knows Arjuna will kill him tomorrow, as he was always destined to; but he will never admit Arjuna is his superior.

No, it is not skill that will give his brother victory, but the light he is enfolded in, from the beginning; while Karna’s life was plunged in darkness

since its first day. Karna sees his mother Kunti now, as she came to him at the river. He feels her fingers caress his cheek, he hears her sob. How futile his life has been; and tomorrow it would end. Somehow, that is so hard to accept: all that could have been and never was, torments Karna. And because of the Dark One who held his horses' reins, the reins of his very fate, Arjuna would triumph.

Karna had lied to Duryodhana. But how could he tell his friend it was later than he imagined, that all was already lost? He could have told him before the war began that the side Krishna was on could never lose. But how could he break his heart? The only way he could break the truth to the Kaurava was by dying.

Tomorrow, Shalya might agree to be his sarathy. What was Shalya before blue Krishna? Besides, Shalya hated Karna. Karna tries to thrust aside the darkness that threatens to choke him. Inevitably, his mind wanders back to his guru Bhargava. The scar on his thigh throbs icily, where once the insect fed as his master lay asleep with his head in his lap. Before his waking eyes, Karna sees Bhargava again. He hears his voice pronounce his curse. 'When you are faced with your most implacable enemy, you will forget the mantras for the devastras!'

He thinks back to the cow he killed on the deserted beach: the brahmana's curse, 'Your chariot-wheels shall be mired on the day of your greatest battle. And you will be shot down when you are helpless, just as you have shot my cow today.'

Yes, he has no doubt, as he allows his memories to bear him far from Kurukshetra, that he will die tomorrow. He submits to the clear swell, it washes the last resistance from him. He sees Krishna's face, black eyes full of mercy; again and again, he sees that face and Karna feels deeply consoled. He feels ready to die, or nearly so.

But he must face Yudhishtira, once, before he does Arjuna. He must conquer him, as well: so Kunti would know that he had spared the lives of her four sons. In his own mind, it was his way of telling them he was their brother. After he died and they learnt who he was, they would cherish the memory. And brilliant Arjuna, the memory of having killed him.

Shifting at will, the visionary night bears him through his whole life, starkly, gently, until he feels his deepest rancor dissolve. Karna is at strange peace when, an hour before dawn, he falls into a dreamless sleep.

FOUR SHALYA

Dawn of the seventeenth day of the war and Duryodhana comes early to Shalya and says, “My lord, I have come to ask a favor.”

“Tell me what it is and consider it given.”

“Karna means to fight Arjuna today. Karna is the better archer; he will kill Arjuna. But there is one advantage the Pandava has that has saved him all these days.”

He pauses. Shalya says impatiently, “And what is that? Come, Duryodhana, tell me what you have come to say.

“My lord, Krishna is immeasurably superior to any sarathy Karna has had. In all my army, there is only one man who can match Krishna. That man, my lord, is you. I beg you, Shalya, be Karna’s sarathy today.”

“How dare you!” roars Shalya. “You dare ask a kshatriya to be a suta to a sutaputra? Already, you have made the suta Senapati of the Kuru army; and now you want me to be his sarathy. Sutas are servants in the courts of kings. How can a crowned king of the earth hold a suta’s chariot-reins?”

Shalya stutters in rage, “You ask me this, as if Karna is my superior. Duryodhana, I can easily kill that man in a duel. Shalya can face Indra and vanquish him! He can rout your Karna, Arjuna and Krishna all together! You have insulted me, Kaurava, I will not fight for you any more. This is not my war that I should tolerate such impudence.”

Shalya turns to walk away. But Duryodhana grasps his hand and stands before him with tears in his eyes! “How can I even dream of suggesting that Karna is your superior? I know you, mighty king. Shalya is the bane of his enemies!

But, my lord, you will not kill your nephews and Arjuna must die if we are to win this war. Of us all, only Karna can kill him; and how will he do that if he does not have a sarathy who is better than Krishna? Only one man on earth is better than the master of Dwaraka: you, O Shalya. I beg you, take Karna’s chariot-reins in your gifted hands; this is a matter of victory or defeat.

Millions have died for me in this war. My Pitama has fallen and my Acharya is dead. I don’t know how I will ever expiate all that sin. But that is not what we must think of now, only winning the war: which we can never do as long as Arjuna lives. Great Kshatriya, I only asked you to take Karna’s reins as

Brahma did Sankara's, when Siva flew to burn the Tripura!"

Shalya glows at the fulsome praise. He says, "So you meant no slight to me, Duryodhana. Since you believe I am the only one who is a match for Krishna, I will be Karna's sarathy today!"

Duryodhana actually kneels at Shalya's feet. "My lord, I can never repay you for this. Now that you have agreed to be my friend's sarathy, I must tell you something else. Karna's guru Bhargava had all his astras from Siva himself. The Lord said to him that he must never teach them to a lowborn man. Yet, Parasurama gave them all to Karna and even his bow, the Vijaya. Bhargava is a trikalagyani, who sees through the three veils of time as you and I see the day. Would he have given Karna the Vijaya and the astras, if Karna were a sutaputra?"

"What are you trying to say, Duryodhana?"

"That since I first met him I have always felt Karna was no sutaputra. All my instincts cry that he is a kshatriya. He is not Atiratha and Radha's natural son, but adopted. My heart always insists that Karna is not just the son of a kshatriya, but of a Deva! Perhaps his mother was a princess and he was born from a night of secret love and abandoned. You all see him every day, my friends, you see how he shines like a God. Tell me, if you did not know he was Atiratha's son wouldn't you say he was not only a kshatriya, but the most exceptional one? Even a Devaputra! Can any sutaputra be Arjuna's equal at archery? Karna surely is."

It is obvious he believes what he is saying. "Shalya, I am convinced you will not be driving a suta-putra's chariot today, but a kshatriya's. Some day the truth will come out and then you will all say that Duryodhana was the only one that realized who Karna really was. I tell you, my friend is the noblest of kshatriyas. Why, I say he was born to rule the world: and so he shall, at my side! I know him long and well now; if Karna is not a kshatriya, none of us is."

Shalya embraces Duryodhana. "Noble Duryodhana, truest of friends! I will drive Karna's chariot as well as I know. But there is a condition I must impose. If I love you, I might be critical of you when I think you are in the wrong. If I am to be Karna's sarathy, I must have the same liberty: I must be able to speak to him as I please.

There are four traits in a man I abhor: when he insults himself, because he feels inferior; when he praises himself too much; when he derides other men and when he is foolhardy, from bravado. While I am Karna's sarathy, I must be free

to censure him if I find any of these weaknesses in him. My censure will sharpen him and perhaps even save his life. He must not mind it.”

Duryodhana has already sent a messenger to Karna with the news that Shalya has agreed to be his charioteer. Just as Shalya finishes, Karna walks up, smiling. He bows deeply to that king, “My lord, I am honored the matchless Shalya will be my sarathy. Of course you may speak freely, whenever you wish, O king.”

Shalya looks at him for a moment. Then, he smiles slowly and says, “I will fetch your chariot, Karna.”

Shalya prepares the chariot for battle, to his satisfaction and brings it out to where the others wait. Karna walks around the ratha in pradakshina, he folds his hands to it. Then he worships the rising sun, chanting a quiet mantra. This done, he respectfully asks Shalya to climb on first, before getting in himself. How splendid those two are in that chariot: like Surya and Agni riding in the pushpaka vimana!

Duryodhana cries, “Today you will do what Bheeshma and Drona could not, my friend. Ride, Karna and destroy our enemies! Come back to me covered in glory. This will be the finest day of our lives.”

Karna reaches out a hand to his friend and he chokes. “For you I will always do my best. Remember that, Duryodhana, that Karna always did his best for you. The rest is in the hands of the Gods.”

Duryodhana wrings his friend’s palm. Shalya flicks his reins over the necks of his superb steeds and they are off at the enemy. Behind him, Karna wipes his eyes. He has no doubt that it is his final journey on which he sets out and this is his last farewell to Duryodhana.

Evil omens attend his going forth and in the sky, which seem ablaze, the seven planets seem to fly at one another to do battle.

FIVE

THE TWO BROTHERS

Karna cries to his sarathy, “Fly at the enemy, O Shalya! I will kill Arjuna today and win this war!”

Shalya remembers his promise to Yudhishtira that he would dishearten the Kauravas, while he fought for them; most of all, he would discourage Karna. Now he is free to speak his mind. He laughs sharply, “Why reach for the stars, Karna? Your ambition flies away with your reason! It is easy enough to talk like this before the fighting begins. Wait until you hear the thunder of the Gandiva. Then we will see how brave you are. I know Arjuna, how powerful he is: but the way you go on, it seems you do not.”

Karna says serenely, “I won’t argue with you today, Shalya. Ride on!”

Karna learnt the art of reading the omens of the earth and the sky from his guru Bhargava. He sees them inauspicious all around him. He is beyond caring; why, he welcomes what he sees. Knowing how cruel his life has been, he goes willingly toward death’s velvet clasp.

Shalya has not finished. “Krishna and Arjuna are like the sun and the moon. You are a firefly beside them. How do you dare challenge Arjuna, except that your good sense has left you?”

Karna growls, “I have sworn to let you speak freely, my lord; but truly, your name suits you well¹. Your tongue is like a dagger! For which side do you fight that you praise the enemy and mock me? No matter. You cannot move me from what I have set out to do today.

Besides, Shalya, I too know something of fate. I know there is such a power and that it is awake when the world sleeps. Its ways are strange and inexorable and men are puppets in its hands. Yes, when I saw Bheeshma fall and Drona die, I knew it was from fate; not they could resist her. But even if we cannot decide the time of our dying, at least it is in our hands to determine how we die: whether as cowards or heroes. By the way we die, in some measure we can triumph over fate.

I know why you speak like this to me today. It is because your heart is with your nephews and you want to make me doubt myself. There is no need for it, O king, because I know already that Arjuna will kill me: because dharma and Krishna are both with him. I am a doomed man; don’t darken my last few hours

in the world by praising Arjuna.”

The astonished Shalya falls silent. At the battlefront, Karna deploys the Kaurava army with vision and elegance. Across the field, Dhrishtadyumna and Arjuna form their legions in a vyuha to subdue the one Karna forms.

Yudhishtira says, “Let us fight them one by one. Arjuna, you ride against Karna. Bheema, you kill Duryodhana today. Nakula, you fight Karna’s sons. Let Sahadeva meet Shakuni, Satanika face Dusasana and Satyaki his cousin Kritavarman. Dhrishtadyumna must contain Aswatthama, or he will raze our army by himself. I will confront Acharya Kripa.”

Once more, conches blare across Kurukshetra and, their eyes full of death, the armies run at each other. It is the seventeenth day of the war and today the roar of the soldiers is just an echo of what it had been on the first day. Both forces have vastly diminished and tired as well. There is hardly any valor left in the men’s hearts, but only prayer and the grim will to survive another day.

What remains of the Trigarta army, which swore to kill Arjuna, it seems ten lives ago, charges him again. He rides against them and makes short work of that dispirited legion, killing many, scattering the rest in the hot breath of his arrows.

Away to his left, another warrior is a wild star on Kurukshetra. Karna, too, is a legion on his own and not a soldier who meets him in battle escapes with his life. At his chariot-wheels ride his sons: as bright as their father, as formidable. Sushena and Satyasena are beside him and Vrishasena behind him. They are like a fiery diamond, the four of them; they cut blandly through the enemy, leaving numberless corpses in their wake. Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Draupadi’s sons, Bheema, Shikhandi, Nakula and Sahadeva all combine to hold up Karna and his sons. But today, Karna’s sarathy is quite as magnificent as his archer is and the Kaurava Senapati is uncontainable. Blood leaps in vivid garlands in the morning sun, around Karna it flows in rills.

Bheema breaks through on a flank and cuts Satyasena down in a fiery storm; the boy’s chariot breaks into flames and he himself has his head struck off by a shaft from his mighty uncle’s bow. Roaring that he was avenging Abhimanyu’s death, Bheema shoots at Vrishasena and Sushena, as well, crippling their chariots and forcing them to run. The brave Vrishasena returns at once in a fresh chariot and guards his father’s back again. Karna melts the Pandava army like his sire does the snow on the Himalaya in spring. Enemy soldiers run screaming from him, or else, die.

Seeing Karna raze his legions on that seventeenth day, Yudhishtira rides at

him, his gentle eyes flaming. Yudhishtira hails the older brother he does not know with harshness quite alien to his nature. He fears this enemy the most. This is the warrior whose very sight makes the Pandava's blood run cold.

Yudhishtira cries, "Sutaputra! Dare you compare yourself to my Arjuna? I hear Duryodhana began this war because he counts on you to win it for him. Come, Suta, show me your valor! Let me save Arjuna the trouble of killing you."

Karna turns to him. A slight smile on his lips, he gazes at Yudhishtira for a long moment, almost in a reverie. Yudhishtira waits, impatient for his challenge to be answered with fight. At last, Karna says slowly, "Ah, you are a great man, Yudhishtira. Though you will hardly believe me, I am happy to spend this moment with you, even if it is in the midst of this infernal war. I greet you, O Kshatriya, as one warrior another!"

Karna raises his bow and they fight. At first, inspired by his terror of his opponent, that he is the one who might kill Arjuna, Yudhishtira fights like a Deva. He strikes Karna unconscious in his chariot. Shalya wheels away briefly from the encounter. Karna jumps up again and now he lifts his archery so Yudhishtira cannot withstand him at all. With razor-headed shafts he kills the Panchala princes Chandradeva and Dandadhara, who rode at Yudhishtira's chariot wheels.

Satyaki and some others fly at Karna from two sides. He is invincible. No one has seen such archery yet on Kurukshetra. Karna brushes the Yadava aside and confronts Yudhishtira again.

Not Yudhishtira, who has always feared Karna, ever imagined that he is such a bowman. But he hardly has time to think: in a flash, his own bow is dissected and his armor struck neatly off his chest. Karna wounds him sharply with a clutch of fine, short-range arrows that make him cry out in pain, as they cover his handsome body in blood. They never pierce him deeply or threaten his life.

Recovering quickly, Yudhishtira picks up a javelin and casts it at Karna like an angry thought. But it seems his enemy sees the lance come at him for an hour and has forever to raise his bow and cut it down. Yudhishtira flings another four javelins at Karna, each one aimed at his heart. In a languid blur, Karna cuts them down, laughing softly. Karna's chariot draws ever closer and he shoots down Yudhishtira's flagstaff and banner, so they fall out of his chariot into the dust; and with them, the Pandava's honor.

Yudhishtira stands helpless before his enemy. Karna has him in the eye of his next arrow; he draws his bowstring to his ear. The war around them freezes; this, surely, is the end. Then, Karna lowers his weapon, rides closer still. Yudhishtira stands at his mercy. Karna reaches out his bow and touches his brother with its tip, in contempt, in tenderness. The moment is like death for Yudhishtira.

Karna says, “You are truly a high-born kshatriya, a scion of the House of Kuru, the eldest Pandava. But it seems you are no match at arms for this lowborn sutaputra! Look, your life is in my hands. That, my lord, is because you are more of a brahmana in spirit than a kshatriya. So don’t challenge your betters on the field of war. Now go back to your brother Arjuna and remember that you are not Karna’s equal. I spare your life. Go.”

Yudhishtira wonders if those are tears he sees in Karna’s eyes! The Pandava stands petrified by the scathing disgrace. Karna turns away and rides off to assail the Pandava army again, with sublime ferocity.

Bheema has seen the shaming of Yudhishtira and his eyes turn scarlet. Smashing his way through the Kaurava army, he rides madly at Karna. He is so furious no sound will come from him. Shalya sees him coming and says to Karna, “Bheema rides at us in wrath. I haven’t seen him like this, even when Abhimanyu died.”

Karna smiles, “Yudhishtira is his God and he can’t bear to see him shamed. All the Pandavas will die for the eldest one. Come, we must fight him.”

Bheema breaks on him. He overwhelms Karna and the Kaurava Senapati faints. Now a volcanic roar explodes from Bheema. Sword drawn, he springs from his chariot and rushes at the fallen warrior. “I will cut his tongue out for what he said to my brother!”

Shalya stands in his way. “Stop, Bheema. You have struck him down and that is revenge enough for Yudhishtira. Remember he spared your life once; don’t demean yourself by attacking him when he had fainted. Besides, your brother Arjuna has sworn to kill Karna. Would you have him perjure himself?”

Growling, Bheema turns back to his chariot and rides away. In a moment, Karna opens his eyes. He springs up and seizes his bow. His hands shake and he says to Shalya, “Ride at Bheema, I must answer him!”

Some way off, Duryodhana sees Karna’s chariot flying toward Bheema and he sends his brothers, fierce Kauravas, to fight at Karna’s side. These are nearer Bheema than Karna is and they reach him first. Bheema turns on them with such

a smile. He croons at them in welcome and then he is at the sons of Dhritarashtra. He excoriates them with his arrows; he smashes their heads into vivid pulp with his mace. Their screams ring across the field and by now, he has lost count of how many he has killed. Roaring, roaring in ecstasy, drenched in his cousins' blood, his clothes, his face stained in rich crimson, Bheema looms on Kurukshetra. By the time Karna comes near him, the other Pandavas have surrounded their brother. The battle disperses.

The Trigarta Samsaptakas challenge Arjuna again: they have the knack of confronting him whenever he is about to ride at an exceptional Kaurava warrior. Now, just when he is going to ask Krishna to ride at Karna, Susharma and his horde appear around him. Arjuna kills a thousand Samsaptakas, but Susharma himself is a master of the devastras. Fighting obsessed, he presses Arjuna hard, while the Pandava kills half his army. At last, Arjuna strikes Susharma unconscious in his chariot and his sarathy bears the Trigarta away, the last straggles of his legion fleeing behind him.

Arjuna is about to ask Krishna to take him where Karna rules the field, littering it with the dead, as if each life counted for less than nothing: when Aswatthama rides on to Arjuna's path. Hailing each other, they begin to fight. Aswatthama casts an occult dome of arrows over Arjuna's chariot; until nothing can be seen of it and there is perfect darkness within.

Arjuna manages to keep those shafts from breaking in on Krishna and himself. Krishna's eyes glitter in the gloom. He rages at his kshatriya, "Everything I said to you has been a waste! Your love for your guru means more to you than your very soul. You see Aswatthama and your hands fumble at your bowstring. Perhaps you would rather see me killed than answer your master's son!"

With a cry, Arjuna shrugs off his reluctance and the pity he feels for Aswatthama, who lost his father yesterday. The Gandiva in his hand is blinding; he is the sun rising to dispel the brahmana's night of arrows. Arjuna smashes the dark cupola and overwhelms Aswatthama. Drona's son swoons and his horses bolt from the field.

SIX

IN YUDHISHTIRA'S TENT

Arjuna turns back to the Kaurava army. Dandadhara, prince of Magadha and his brother Danda charge the Pandava. But they are like jackals, after he has fought Aswatthama the tiger. Arjuna strikes the first Magadhan prince's head off with a crescent-tipped arrow and fells his brother with a shaft through his throat.

Another company of Samsaptakas rides at him, like a refrain in the horrible song, which is this war. Susharma is not with this legion and Arjuna makes short work of them, killing a hundred and the rest run. Krishna cries, "We must fight Karna, victory lies beyond his death."

"Ride at him then, Krishna! I am ready."

As they go, the gandharva horses obeying their dark sarathy's thoughts, they see Aswatthama, recovered, ride back into battle. A powerful and inordinately proud kshatriya, the Pandya king confronts him. Arjuna and Krishna watch helplessly as the brahmana kills him with eight arrows that ruin his chest and pin him to his chariot-head. He has fought like ten men for the Pandavas and his is a loss. No time to mourn him; like death's wind, they fly toward Karna. Aswatthama sees Dhrish-tadyumna across the field and rides at his father's killer.

The Gandiva hums in Arjuna's hands, as he cuts his way to where Karna reigns over Kurukshetra. Like Yama's dire thought, Karna's chariot skims across the field, with Shalya inspired at his reins, Shalya quick as light. Krishna, who sees deeply into the tragedy of that warrior, is moved by the spectacle of Karna at war.

He says to Arjuna, "Look at him, like a dancer! How graceful your mortal enemy is, how awesome. Not for long shall this earth be blessed with heroes like him. How splendid he is, in every limb, every movement. I could just stand and watch him."

Arjuna sees briefly with Krishna's eyes and sees the splendor of Karna. But his sarathy's moment of eulogy is past. He says quickly, "He covers the earth with our soldiers' corpses¹ and he must die. Look how his face shines with unearthly light. Heaven's touch is upon him and his days of sorrow on earth are over. Arjuna, prepare yourself for the battle for which you were born."

Meanwhile, wounded by Karna, Yudhishtira has taken to his tent and his

bed. His body is a flame of pain and his mind a sad fire. He had never wanted this war and it was even more terrible than he had feared. His gentle soul is mortified by the relentless bloodshed of seventeen days. Now, when Karna humiliates him, his spirit can hardly bear the strain any more. Arjuna had said he would raze the enemy's best warriors by himself. But Karna has sway over Kurukshetra, while Arjuna does little to stop him.

An abyss yawns before the despairing Yudhishtira. Now that Karna leads the Kaurava legions, the Pandava is full of fear. His own defeat at the sutaputra's hands seems ominous to him. Yudhishtira lies alone in his tent, in agony, his thoughts all black. From the field of dharma, Yama's field, the screams of the men Karna kills waft in to him and he covers his ears.

As Arjuna and Krishna ride toward Karna, a worried Bheema appears in their path. He says, "Karna wounded him and Yudhishtira left the field."

Arjuna cries, "I must see my brother. I cannot fight until I am sure he is well and I have his blessing.

Krishna turns back to the camp; he brings the chariot to Yudhishtira's tent. Yudhishtira sees them enter and springs up from his bed. His face lights up and he clasps Arjuna with the cry, "You have killed him! With Karna dead, the war will end. I am so proud of you, Arjuna. Awake or asleep, I always saw the sutaputra's face before me; why, the universe seemed to be full of just Karna. With which astra did you kill him?"

Arjuna says, "I haven't fought Karna yet. Bheema told us you were wounded and we came to see you. But bless me now and I will keep my oath."

A spasm of darkness twitches on Yudhishtira's face. He flashes at his brother, "Coward! I counted on you. Shame on you, Arjuna, yours is a hollow fame. The Gandiva is just an ornament in your hands. Give it to me, I will go and kill the suta myself!"

Arjuna's face turns red and he draws his sword to kill his brother, but Krishna lays a hand on his arm. He says, "He only means to rouse you to kill your enemy."

Yet, for a moment the brothers stand glaring at each other. Arjuna breathes, "I swore secretly to the Gandiva that I would cut off the head of any man that said 'Give the Gandiva to me.'"

The moment is fraught with danger, then the darkness leaves Yudhishtira; with a cry, he embraces Arjuna². "Karna humiliated me before both armies. Oh, he is formidable. He is greater than Pitama or the Acharya. He fights like Indra

and I fear for us all. Most of all for you, my Arjuna, because surely no one else can kill him. I am sorry I spoke cruelly to you, but I will have no peace until this terrible man is dead.”

The brothers embrace again, then Yudhishtira says, “Go now, my child. Go with my blessing and return victorious!”

Arjuna touches his feet and Krishna and he leave the tent. They have their horses rubbed down and give them water to drink. They refresh themselves, then climb into the white chariot and ride slowly into battle again.

As they go, Krishna says quietly, “You have sworn to kill Karna and so you shall. But remember he is a noble antagonist. He has Agni’s energy, Vayu’s speed and Yama’s wrath³. Never forget, Arjuna, that he is the best archer in the world.” Arjuna stiffens. Krishna goes on, “Yes, he is not merely your equal, he is better than you are. Karna defeated all the kings of the earth, just as you did during the Rajasuya. When he won a bride for Duryodhana, he vanquished the lord of Kasi by himself. Why, Karna is the only man who humbled Jarasandha, whom I could not face in battle.

Remember all this, Arjuna. Never for a moment allow yourself to think he is just a sutaputra and you will beat him easily. If you fight this enemy with that thought in your heart, he will kill you. There is no one like Karna. This will be the battle of your life: the one that will take you to the brink of death. Only there, at the very limits of your powers and your will, can you kill Karna. To do this thing you must become more of an archer than you have ever been: even while you fight him!”

Krishna pauses as they draw nearer, then, says, “He is a great man, none greater than him. In his way, he is a man of dharma. You, Arjuna, will have the fortune of killing an incomparable warrior.”

The Pandava says simply, “You are with me, Krishna. I will not fail.”

They arrive at the edge of the war and plunge in. Arrows from the Gandiva clear a path for them, in light, fire and blood. Ahead, they see Bheema, raging like his father Vayu when he blows as the dread north wind. Arjuna sees his brother dripping gore, most of it from Duryodhana’s brothers whom he has killed. Bheema is still not quenched; roars issue from him, like a hungry lion’s. Duryodhana sends Shakuni to contain him, but Bheema strikes the Gandhara king unconscious.

Bheema hears the deep thunder of the Gandiva and knows Yudhishtira is well. Truly like a mighty lion, he turns his head and roars louder than ever, in

joy. Nakula and Sahadeva are also at hand and soon the four Pandavas fight side by side.

Then, Karna rides at them. He burns like hell's flames on the field and Yudhishtira's army cowers from him.

SEVEN

THE TASTIEST DRINK

Inexorably, Arjuna and Karna thread their way through the armies toward each other. Arjuna breathes, “How glorious Shalya is at Karna’s chariot-head; why, he seems like you, Krishna. And, ah, how radiant Karna is!” He is quivering with excitement. “Come, my Lord, let us ride at him. Let the duel begin.”

In the other chariot, laden with tiger-skins, Shalya does not mock his warrior any more. He is awed by Karna’s virtuosity and quite forgets his promise to Yudhishtira! Not he has ever seen an archer who can hold a candle to the one riding in his chariot.

Now, Shalya says, “Look, Arjuna rides at us. Your time has come, Karna, kill the Pandava. As for me, I take back everything I said earlier. Now I say to you: truly, truly, you are the greatest archer in the world! I had not dreamt that any man could wield a bow as you do. Not Aswatthama, Drona or Bheeshma is your equal. I want you to know I am proud to be your sarathy. Once, already, you won the earth for Duryodhana. Kill Arjuna today and make a gift of the world to your friend for the second time!”

Karna is speechless. Tears well in his eyes and stream in the wind. When he finds his voice, he says, “My lord! You fill me with joy. Though I know better than anyone what an archer Arjuna is, for Duryodhana’s sake I will do my best to kill him today. Take me to my enemy, Shalya, the hour of reckoning has come.”

Duryodhana sees Karna’s chariot and Arjuna’s fly at each other, like two comets in the vaults of space. A pang in his heart, he sends some of his brothers into the fray. A general battle breaks out as the bloodthirsty Bheema bursts upon those sons of Dhritarashtra.

Satyaki cuts down Karna’s son Sushena in an arrowstorm, mangling the youth’s chest. In fury, Karna beheads Dhrishtadyumna’s son. Five Panchalas surround him: Shikhandi, Janamejaya, Yuddhamanyu, Uttamaujas and Dhrishtadyumna himself. Not five of them together are any match for Karna. Swiftly, in a realm of archery they can neither fathom nor endure, they are beaten back. Saty-aki joins them and more Panchala warriors. Karna holds them all at bay. Kshatriyas from both sides stream in to balance the encounter: to

Karna's exasperation and Arjuna's. A hundred battling chariots separate them.

With a shout, Duryodhana rides into that cauldron and a score of his brothers with him, Dusasana leading the rest. Bheema sees Dusasana and, eyes shining, turns on him. But Dusasana fights as if destiny lays its hand on his head, blessing him.

Bheema roars, "How many years I have waited for this moment!"

Dusasana roars back, "And I, Bheema, even longer than you!"

"I owe you a debt, cousin. Remember the day you laid your vile hands on Panchali? Since then, I have thought only of when I would repay my debt to you. Have you forgotten that day, Dusasana? I have dreamt of it every night."

His cousin replies mockingly, "I haven't forgotten! And so much besides. Do you remember how you scurried like rats from the house of lac? How you hid in the forest like animals? You found a fine wife for yourself there: a rakshasi, well suited to you! Then, in Panchala, your brother won another wife for you. And she was such a woman! You talk of my touching her, but not that she shared the beds of all five of you. Like your mother before her, Bheema! It runs in your family."

Bheema roars like a lion shot with arrows. Absolutely bloody-eyed, he fights on. Dusasana contains him. He means to provoke the Pandava: to make him careless and have his life.

Dusasana cries, "And I remember the day your wife stood before us in the sabha in Hastina. She was our slave that day, Bheema. She was ours to do as we pleased with her!"

Bheema's roars explode from him more violently than ever. He is mad with anger, just as Dusasana wants him to be. Bheema casts a javelin at his cousin, a streak of wrath. Dusasana cuts it down with an arrow like time. Bheema picks up his bow again, but Dusasana breaks it in his hands. With a curse, Bheema leaps down from his chariot, mace in hand. Unmindful of the shafts Dusasana strikes him with, he runs at the Kaurava's horses. Before Dusasana's sarathy can turn them away, Bheema kills the lot with dreadful strokes.

In a wink, the Pandava clambers on to the chariot and one blow knocks Dusasana onto the ground. Bheema jumps down after him and plants an immense foot on his chest. Dusasana does not stir, all around them a hush falls. Bheema stands there, rolling his eyes, tossing his great head from side to side, until he spots Duryodhana.

A smile dawns on Bheema's face, when he sees the eldest Kaurava frozen in his chariot. Ring upon ring of kshatriyas, Pandava and Kaurava, circle the fallen Dusasana and Bheema standing over him. Bheema looks at Kripa, Aswatthama, Karna and Duryodhana and he throws back his head and gives such a terrible laugh!

Bheema says to Duryodhana, "I have your brother like a sparrow in an eagle's talons! What can you do about it, Duryodhana?"

Dusasana whimpers. Bheema growls, "So you remember everything, do you, cousin? Then you must remember that I have sworn to drink your blood. Nobody will stop me now.

Duryodhana, seventeen days ago, you sent that jackal Uluka to me with a proud message. 'Bheema, you can carve meat on a kitchen board, but let us see how you carve my brother's heart!' Look at your brother now. Do you see the terror in his eyes? He begs you to save him, but you cannot. And now for sweet revenge."

No one stirs, no one can. Quick as thinking, Bheema draws his sword and, with a clean stroke, cuts off Dusasana's right hand, jewels and all. In the vast silence, Dusasana's screams ring across Kurukshetra, as blood from his severed wrist gushes in a geyser over Bheema. The Pandava holds up the bloody hand and roars to the armies watching, entranced, "This is the hand that dared touch Pan-chali's hair!"

Dusasana screams on, but Bheema has not finished. Smoothly, he opens a gash on Dusasana's breast with the tip of his sword. Kneeling in a flash, he tears his cousin's chest open with his fingers, exposing his heart. Dusasana screams his last, as Bheema bends like an unimaginable beast of prey and drinks at the scarlet font. Then, he raises his bloody face, smiling and cries, "Aaaaah! The tastiest drink I have ever had!"

Dusasana lies limp on Kurukshetra. Bheema rises away from his corpse. His roar shakes the earth, "Panchali, I have avenged you! Come wash your hair in this wretch's blood."

Crooning in ecstasy, Draupadi runs out on to the frozen field: an exquisite and vengeful spirit! With deep cries of fulfillment, she bathes her black, loose tresses in dead Dusasana's gushing blood, from his severed wrist, from his chest.

Ashen-faced, Duryodhana turns away from that spectacle. Karna breaks down and sobs. Shalya says firmly to him, "This is war, Karna; in war these things happen. You must not give in to grief, now Duryodhana's fate is in just

your hands. Let us find Arjuna, only his death can pay for this outrage. His death can still win the war for us.”

Shalya wheels his chariot away. Battle breaks out again on the barbarous field and the Pandava army is in great heart. Valiant as his father, Karna’s son Vrishasena rides at Bheema. He mows a bloody way through the Pandava legions and it seems no one will stop him. With a proud gleam in his eyes, Karna pauses to watch his son. Suddenly, another Pandava appears in Vrishasena’s path; one that is a dark flame in his chariot, whose bow is an arc of the moon.

Even as he had sworn to, when Abhimanyu died, Arjuna kills Karna’s son while the father watches helplessly. A golden arrow hums into Vrishasena’s chest and pierces his heart in a spurt of crimson, killing him before he can even scream. Karna’s roars echo across Kurukshetra.

EIGHT

KARNA AND ARJUNA

Karna cries, “At him, Shalya! I must kill Arjuna.”

The death of his son has given him the anger he needs to fight his brother. As if all those countless soldiers knew the time had come, they part like two seas and the chariots of Arjuna and Karna fly at each other. The fate of the war will be decided by this battle, which would be as the heart of every other one fought on Kurukshetra.

The chariots face each other. A stirring breeze has sprung up on Kurukshetra and like death’s herald, strokes Karna and Arjuna. For a long time, they stand still in their rathas, not a muscle moving, staring at each other in a contention of wills. The two warriors are relieved that at last this moment has arrived. Not both of them would survive the duel to come and the one who did would never fight another like it.

Queerly light-headed, Karna says to Shalya, “My lord, I think I shall win today. But if I don’t, O king, what will you do?”

Shalya turns his head and Karna is startled to see his eyes moist. Shalya says, “Karna, you are the best archer on earth. I am sure you will win. But if fate runs against you and you should lose, why, I will kill Arjuna and Krishna to avenge you.”

Thus, solemnly, speaks Shalya, who had practically been Karna’s enemy before this day. In Shalya’s change of heart, Karna feels he has some redress for all the years he was slighted by the kshatriyas of the world.

Across from them, in the other chariot, Arjuna says to Krishna, “I hope I can kill Karna, my lord. But if I am killed instead, what will you do?”

Krishna turns back to look at his archer and his eyes are as deep as midnight. A smile touches the dark sarathy’s lips, he says quietly, “The sun may fall out of the sky, but you will not fail today. Fire may turn cold, but Arjuna will prevail.” He pauses and then, softer than ever, adds, “And if somehow Karna kills you, then be certain the end of this world has come. Karna and Shalya shall die, I will tear them apart with my hands. Why, Arjuna, I will burn up this earth.” Arjuna shivers to hear him; he has no doubt Krishna will do as he says. His charioteer smiles again, “But it won’t come to that, Arjuna. I know it.”

Some way off, Aswatthama sees Karna and Arjuna tensed for battle. He hears silence fallen on Kurukshetra, every other contention stopped. A wave of pity, for all the men come here to kill and die, overwhelms him. At his side, in the same chariot, Duryodhana still sobs for Dusasana. Aswat-thama takes the Kaurava's hand and says fervently, "Stop the war now, Duryodhana! Make peace, it is still not too late. My father died for this war, Bheeshma has fallen for it. Dusasana died and so many of your brothers. Stop it, before Karna is also killed.

The Pandavas are men of dharma; they are your cousins. I will go to Arjuna and say that you want peace. Krishna will be delighted. The truth is they cannot kill me and they cannot kill Kripa. But you can still lose the war and then everything will be as ashes. Enough blood has been spilt. Let Arjuna and Karna live as friends, both jewels of the Kuru Empire.

Yudhishtira won't refuse an offer of peace. He hates this slaughter, anyway and the others will listen to him. Save your life, Duryodhana; save so many lives. Why, save your soul! You know I love you, my friend; why, I love you more than I do anyone else in the world. Now I am afraid for you. Karna will die if he fights Arjuna. It cannot be otherwise, as long as Krishna is Arjuna's sarathy. How much grief weighs already upon your spirit; you will not be able to bear it if Karna is killed. I beg you, send me to the Pandavas now! Offer them an honorable peace."

Duryodhana smiles grimly at his boyhood friend. "Everything you say is true, Aswatthama and I am grateful to you. But it is too late and has been for some time. Look where Dusasana lies, his heart torn out by the beast. How can I offer peace to that monster and his brothers? Aswatthama, my friend, it is not we who decide these things, but fate. We are her playthings, her means to achieve inscrutable ends. Karna always says that we have no armor to protect us against fate and he is right. I thank you for your love, but we have come too far to turn back. This war will be fought until the last man on one side is dead."

Duryodhana tells his charioteer to take them to where Arjuna and Karna face each other. All the Kaurava legions have gathered behind Karna and the Pandava army behind Arjuna. Solemnly Karna raises the Vijaya above his head. Arjuna, too, lifts the Gandiva aloft. Both armies blow conches and shout their warrior's names, until earth and sky resound with 'Arjuna! Arjuna! Jaya! Jaya!' and 'Karna! Karna! Jaya! Jaya!'

In a moment, the duel begins¹. At first, they fight with common arrows and lances, unhurriedly, each one settling into the battle, feeling his adversary out.

Yet, already, their archery is breathtaking! Those who watch see their bodies become lustrous and their weapons shine. It is not that no other kshatriya on Kurukshetra can match what Karna and Arjuna do; but surely none with such ease and grace. Many soldiers wish this duel would go on forever. It is like great music.

With no warning, Arjuna summons an agneyastra and shoots it at Karna. Sheets of white flames blow at Karna's chariot. Quicker than seeing, Karna summons a varunastra and a hundred showers douse the flames. Thick smoke billows there and darkness falls. Arjuna invokes a vayavyastra to blow the smoke away with a scented breeze.

With a growl, Arjuna chants the mantra for a more powerful weapon: the aindrastra. It drifts up from his bow and hangs in the air. From it, thousands of arrows whistle down at Karna and the Kau-rava army behind him. A thousand Kaurava soldiers fall each moment and it seems Duryodhana's army will be razed.

The thunder of Karna's bowstring rocks Kurukshetra. He looses a silver shaft charged with the bhargavastra. That weapon flashes up into the sky and puts out the aindrastra, so it falls away spent. The bhargavastra hangs fire in the sky and banks of arrows scream down from it, killing thousands of Pandava soldiers.

A cheer goes up from Duryodhana's legions, Karna's name rings across Kurukshetra. Above the deafening noise, Arjuna hears Bheema's angry voice. "The enemy laughs at you, Arjuna. Tell me if you can't fight this man and I will kill him with a blow of my mace!"

Krishna echoes Bheema, "It seems we will never break out of the mantle Karna wraps us in. What is the matter with you, Arjuna? Why do you hesitate?"

Now, the strangest thing happens in the Pandava's chariot enveloped in Karna's shroud. Krishna speaks to Arjuna as Narayana to Nara.

"Have you forgotten who you are? Don't you remember how you killed the Asura Dambodhbhava once? Here he is again, he has returned as Karna. Don't stay your hand, Kshatriya; this enemy is more ancient and powerful than you understand. He has come across ten lives to have revenge. Use the brahmastra, Arjuna, or you will die. Rouse your slumbering self, kill Karna!"

Fantastic vision is upon Arjuna! He sees another life and the deep reasons why Karna confronts him on Kurukshetra today. Shaking off the stupor of the bhargavastra, he invokes the brahmastra. A molten arrow flies up and unfurls in

ten thousand golden shafts. Still, the bhargavastra resists the brahmastra.

The veil of arrows that covered Arjuna's chariot falls away. No more shafts fly down at the Pan-dava army, as, gradually, the brahmastra absorbs the bhargavastra. No soldier can look up into the sky where the two missiles are locked.

Meanwhile, Arjuna and Karna shoot at each other again, a hundred common arrows every moment. The astras above extinguish one another and an emboldened Arjuna covers Karna's chariot in a blaze of silver shafts. A gasp goes up from the Kaurava legions, they are certain Karna is slain. Then, like the sun rising after night's final yaama, the resplendent Suryaputra stands forth again and Arjuna's darkness of arrows falls away around him.

Karna looses another astra at Arjuna, who knows the weapon with which to quiet it. Kurukshetra is full of spirit presences, of the lords of the astras. In his tent, Yudhishtira hears that Karna and Arjuna are dueling. Despite the agony in his body where Karna struck him, he drives out to watch the fateful encounter.

The Devas gather above Kurkshetra in invisible vimanas. Indra and Surya almost fight over the battle between their sons. Karna dominates the field of dharma. He not only holds Arjuna off, but sends an occasional teasing shaft at Bheema who stands watching, breathlessly, his eyes bulging. Beyond the two warring kshatriyas, their thermal arrows immolate columns of soldiers. Yet not a man stirs from his place; they will rather die than miss this duel.

Silence rules Kurukshetra, except for the thunder of the strings of the Gandiva and the Vijaya and the whistling of a hundred incredible shafts that fly from them, each impossible moment. Now and again, when one of them surpasses himself for a breathless instant, a cheer goes up from this army or the other.

Suddenly, Karna severs Arjuna's bowstring. Quick as a thought, Arjuna replaces it and is about to raise the Gandiva again, when, with uncanny aim, Karna breaks the Pandava's bowstring yet again. Quick as light, Arjuna strings the Gandiva afresh and raises his bow once more. Yet again, Karna snaps his string with an unerring shaft. This happens no less than eleven times! Karna feels a surge of love for this implacable brother of his. The twelfth time, Karna does not sever Arjuna's bowstring, but shoots five scorching narachas at Krishna. In a split second, Arjuna strings his bow and slices those five serpentine shafts along their lengths.

The duel nears its crescendo; each moment of it is like an hour of any other.

The brothers fight at the very ends of their skill and endurance, at death's threshold.

NINE

THE MIRED WHEEL

Once he sloughs off his first hesitation, Arjuna fights exceptionally. Faced with the only real rival—Karna, who even Krishna said was better than him—Arjuna's archery becomes a mystic thing. So absorbed is the Pandava, he is hardly aware of what he does. The Gandiva is like part of his body, his very soul. Together, bow and bowman are one being: godlike!

All the Kaurava warriors who stood around Karna, guarding his flanks and rear, flee. Many are killed by Arjuna's luminous volleys. Duryodhana roars at the deserters, but nothing can persuade them to go back.

Karna is hard-pressed to keep the Pandava from burying him in a night of arrows from which he will never emerge. He cuts down as many shafts as he can; they flow at him endlessly, many finding their mark on either Shalya or himself. Karna has no inexhaustible quivers like his antagonist. There comes a time when the Kaurava soldiers can no longer see their Senapati, or anything around him. He is hidden in a perfect darkness of arrows: Arjuna hides the face of the sun.

Fighting for his life now, Karna knows the moment has arrived when he must either kill Arjuna or die. At darkness' heart, Karna briefly longs for Indra's Shakti; but the Shakti had returned to the Deva, after it killed Ghatotkacha. His death drawn so near he can reach out and touch it, Karna summons the last weapon he has left with which he can still win this duel. From its scented case, Karna draws the nagastra. Chanting its mantra, which perhaps five warriors on earth know, he fixes the glimmering missile to his bowstring. Already, it seethes and hisses like a cobra disturbed in its nest. Emerald scales cover that weapon; fangs yawn at its snake's-head, below lidless eyes that gaze plainly at Kurukshetra. Karna aims at Arjuna's throat, he means to cut his head from his body.

Karna is plunged in the night of arrows and Arjuna cannot see what he is doing. He does not see the nagastra in Karna's hands; he doesn't see him fit it to his bowstring. Shalya says to his warrior, "Don't aim at his throat, you might miss. At least, send another shaft at his heart."

Karna replies, "A warrior never changes his aim. A real archer never doubts himself, that he must shoot a second arrow. Karna never misses his mark."

He draws the Vijaya's string to his ear and, blinded, Arjuna shades his eyes. Karna cries to his inveterate enemy, "Take a good look at the world, Arjuna, this is the last moment of your life!"

A bolt of lightning, the nagastra streaks across Kurukshetra, spitting green fire. A cry goes up from the Pandava soldiers, they are sure Arjuna will die. Karna is certain his aim is true. Shalya, watching, thinks Arjuna is a dead man. Arjuna himself sees the macabre weapon flash at him out of the darkness with which he has covered Karna and he can do nothing against the astra. For that moment, Arjuna also thinks he will die.

They have all reckoned without a blue charioteer. Krishna sees the nagastra; he sees it presciently even before Karna shoots it. As soon as the green thing flares at his kshatriya's throat, Krishna jerks on his reins. He forces his gandharva steeds down on their knees! In a moment's core, those horses kneel and the chariot tilts forward a hand's length. The nagastra flashes true to its mark, but Arjuna's throat is a hand's length lower than it had been. The emerald arrow whisks the jeweled crown that Indra gave him from his head and leaves a deep scratch; otherwise, it does not harm the Pandava.

Arjuna feels as if he has died and been reborn. Wild cheering breaks out among the Pandava foot-soldiers. The howl on Bheema's lips is stanchd and a yell of joy issues from him instead. Color flushes back into Yudhishtira's face, which had gone pale as death in that awful moment. A sigh like a serpent's comes from Karna: that moment, despite the odds of dharma, victory might have been his. Now, all is lost. He has no other weapon like the nagastra, none that can kill Arjuna. The Suryaputra also knows the Pandava would have been dead except for his sarathy. Then, he had always known that, no matter what, Krishna was always with Arjuna: so, he, Karna, could never win this duel.

Yudhishtira's heart had stopped beating for that life long moment. Flushed himself, Arjuna darts a grateful smile at Krishna, who is as unruffled as ever, just his eyes a shade brighter. The Pandava ties up his long hair and the scratch on his scalp with a white scarf and he has recovered enough to resume battle.

Meanwhile, a bizarre thing happens to Karna. The crown his nagastra shot from Arjuna's head is the same one Indra gave him. From where that kirita fell and Karna's shaft with it, a serpent thrusts itself out from the ground. Invisible to every other eye, it flies through the air to where Karna stands disconsolate in his chariot.

Startled, Karna stares at the gleaming snake. It speaks to him, "You did not know it, but I entered your nagastra subtly; but for me, your arrow would have

been quicker and Krishna would not have saved Arjuna. I am Aswasena. Long ago, when the Khandava vana burned and he killed my mother, I swore that I would kill Arjuna. Set me on another arrow, Karna and shoot me at the Pandava. This time there will be no mistake, I swear Arjuna will die.”

Karna cries angrily, “Haven’t you done enough? Karna needs no help to fight his enemies. I would rather die than depend on you. Leave me, before I kill you!”

Aswasena’s eyes glint balefully. He hisses, “If you won’t help me, I will take revenge by myself.”

He flashes through the air, invisibly, at Arjuna’s chariot. But Krishna sees him coming and says, “A serpent comes to kill you!”

By Krishna’s grace, Arjuna sees the snake, hood unfurled, flying to sting him. In a flash, he cuts Aswasena in shreds with six light-like arrows. Panting, Arjuna says, “Who was he that came to kill me though no one sent him?”

Krishna, who knows all things, tells him. Karna and Arjuna resume their duel, more intensely than ever. Soon both of them stream blood from a hundred wounds they have opened on each other. Shalya and Krishna are not spared either.

Karna’s time runs out swiftly; every moment, his death glides nearer. Two curses stalk him close. Fate and the very earth conspire to fulfil the first one. All at once, the ground under his chariot turns soft and his chariot-wheel sinks into the yielding earth. Shalya’s horses cannot pull them out. The ratha tilts backwards and his fine steeds’ hooves are off the ground. Warrior, sarathy, chariot and animals are askew. Karna cannot possibly fight as he is.

A memory from years ago floats up into his mind. He sees a wind-swept beach and at its edge, the corpse of the cow he killed. Karna sees the brahmana’s anguished face before him again. He hears the man curse him, his words ringing above the surf, “When you face your greatest enemy, your chariot-wheel will be mired in the earth.”

A shiver runs through Karna’s body: death’s first touch. He fights more furiously than ever. He thinks of one final astra he has, which might still finish Arjuna. Despair stokes Karna. He decides to use a weapon, which will kill a hundred thousand men besides the Pandava. Karna summons the brahmastra against Arjuna. He draws a golden arrow from his quiver, fits it to his bow in a blur and begins to chant its mantra.

Another face floats up before his mind’s eye: a face he has hardly dared

remember all these years. Karna sees his guru Bhargava's face before him. He sees his master's angry eyes. He hears his curse across the years, "When you most need an astra to save your life, you will forget the mantras I have taught you."

Karna fumes. He cannot remember all the mantra for the brahmastra. Arjuna's arrows swell at him in a squall. Now Arjuna severs Karna's bowstring, again and again, as quickly as he can mend it. Tears stand in Karna's eyes. He recalls the misfortunes of his life. He cries, "They say that dharma always watches over those who keep it. I have walked the way of dharma, as I saw it: but there is no such thing in this world!"

Arjuna's arrows draw flowers of blood on Karna's body, as he stands helpless in his mired chariot. Arjuna invokes the aindrastra. At the very last moment, the mantra for the brahmastra flashes into Karna's mind and he manages to contain the aindra with the brahma. The two astras fuse in the sky.

Every moment Karna's chariot-wheel sinks deeper into the yielding earth. With a curse, he leaps down to the ground. Kneeling, he pulls out the mired wheel, lifting the chariot with awesome strength. At that moment, Arjuna is thinking of the raudrastra. When Karna sets the chariot-wheel down on what he believes is firm ground, it promptly sinks again.

Howling, he bends again at the offending wheel and cries, "Arjuna, wait until I lift this wheel out. You are a kshatriya. It isn't dharma for you to shoot at me when I stand helpless. Give me a moment and we will fight again."

A wild laugh rings out from Krishna. "So you want dharma from Arjuna now! Tell me, Karna, have you always walked the way of dharma yourself? Was it dharma when you plotted against the Pandavas' lives with Duryodhana? Was it dharma when Draupadi was dragged into the sabha in Hastinapura and you told Dusasana to strip her naked? Was, perhaps, the game of dice dharma? And let me remind of another moment of dharma, just four days ago."

Krishna's face is a mask. "Was it dharma when six of you killed Abhimanyu, when he was alone and without a weapon in his hands? And who broke the boy's bowstring from behind? I hear it was you, Karna. Was that dharma? That you demand dharma now from Abhimanyu's father!"

Krishna's lips throb and Karna reels at what he says: the Avatara's words are like arrows, tipped with terrible truth. He leaves the mired wheel and with a roar, turns to fight. Arjuna does not summon the raudrastra he had thought of, but looses an agneyastra instead. It burns at Karna. Karna invokes another

varunastra to quell the fire in the sky. The effort to remember the mantra for the sea-weapon drains him. Karna staggers against the side of his chariot.

Arjuna invokes the vayavyastra to blow away the clouds of smoke that billow around Karna's chariot. They screen Karna, give him time to lift his wheel from the sludge. He hardly has the strength any more to do this. His mind is numb. He realizes he cannot remember another mantra. Somehow, he keeps his bow raised and fights back with common arrows. Visions overwhelm Karna. He sees his life flash before his eyes, in a moment. He sees it all so vividly and with complete detachment, as if he was watching someone else's years. Why, even the present moment, this great duel, assumes a quality of dream. Wonderful illumination floods his tired body. Somehow, he fights on.

Shalya is helpless. His horses are covered in blood, wild-eyed from the wounds Arjuna has given them. Neighing frantically, they strain against their bits. The mired wheel will not let them escape and their legs thresh the air. Shalya is also covered in blood, like his archer on the ground. Gritting his teeth in a last, tremendous effort, Karna shoots a heavy wooden arrow at Arjuna. With a crack like thunder, it flashes into the Pandava's chest. The Gandiva slips from Arjuna's hand and he falls.

A cry of dismay from the Pandava army and an excited cheer begins on the lips of the Kaurava legions. It dies before being given full throat, because Arjuna rises as if from the dead, groggily, but his eyes turning red. He picks up his bow and cuts down Karna's banner of Anga. Karna roars as if he has been shot through his heart; then the wave of visions smothers him again. It is as if there are two men in his body: one fights Arjuna for his life; and the other a Karna wafted far from this field, from this very world on a bright current of bliss.

Karna, the kshatriya, strains again at his chariot-wheel to lift it out. By now, he is bathed in blood. Tears run channels down his cheeks. With his huge effort, the sinews on his back stand out like snakes. Again, he sees the face of the brahmana who cursed him. He hears his voice, as if the man spoke them even now, 'And just as you have killed my cow, when she least expected it, so, too, you will meet your death, when you are not ready for it.'

Krishna cries to Arjuna, "Quick! Kill him now!"

Karna kneels on the ground, bending his back to his task. Slowly, the chariot-wheel slides out from its furrow. Arjuna draws an uncommon arrow from his quiver, its head wide as two hands and shaped like a thunderbolt. It is the anjalika and the Kauravas who watch hold their breath. Caught in a dream himself, Arjuna chants the weapon's mantra. The moment pauses as if time will

stand still in it. Fluidly Arjuna draws his bowstring to his ear and looses the anjalika at his sworn enemy, his brother. It is just past high noon.

A clap of thunder, the light of a sunflare and the arrow flies at Karna. Karna turns his head to that sound. The livid astra seems to take forever to reach him; Karna looks straight into Arjuna's eyes and a smile of supreme contempt lights his face. As both armies watch, transfixed, the astra takes off Karna's head in a burst of wild roses and it falls to the earth, brilliant, like the setting sun. The last disdainful smile still curves his haughty lips and at last, death's peace softens his face.

Karna's headless trunk sways and falls beside the chariot-wheel that was his undoing. A pulsing light issues from his bloody neck and rises so slowly from him, as if it was reluctant to leave his magnificent body. Majestically, that light, his soul, rises into the sky and is absorbed into the sun.

TEN

THE SORROWING SUN

Karna lies on the earth like a fallen star. And it seems nothing beautiful is left in the world after he left it, as if all that was noble has died with him. High noon of the seventeenth day of the dharma yuddha claims Karna's life. As the Pandava legions break into deafening cheers, the Sun above pales in grief to see his son slain by Arjuna. He shines so dimly he seems like a moon in the sky. An abrupt twilight falls on the battlefield, where Karna lies cut in two on Kurukshetra.

His head is like a thousand-petaled lotus sprouted on the earth and his body gleams like gold. Slowly, the Sun contains his searing sorrow and shines down again on the world: but with soft evening light though he is at his zenith.

Shocked, his eyes streaming, Shalya drives his chariot back to the Kaurava camp. Both its banner and its warrior have fallen. Strangely, when Karna dies, the chariot comes out easily from the mire, as if its wheel was never stuck at all. Amidst the exultant roaring of the Pandava army, their blasting conches and trumpets, Shalya rides back in a sad frenzy.

Numbly, he comes to Duryodhana's tent and finds him outside, in a terrible state. The Kaurava's chest heaves in gasps and no words come from his lips that seek to form them, again and again: to cry out his untellable grief. Tears course down Duryodhana's face, trails of fire. His heart, which bore the death of his brothers and his sons so bravely, cannot believe his friend is dead.

Duryodhana sees Shalya in the empty chariot. His eyes roll up; his legs buckle under him and he falls in a heap. Shalya runs to him and lifts him up gently. He carries him into his tent, where the Kaurava is ministered to with scented water and salts.

Duryodhana has gone limp. His face is ashen, as if his very life has left him and no word comes from him still. Sitting beside him, Shalya takes his hand and tries to comfort him. "My son, don't let your heart break. All this happens only as fate wills. I saw how Karna fought today and I tell you only fate could have brought him down. But how he raged before she could have her way with him and I was proud to be his sarathy. Arjuna did not kill him; fate did. If it had been a duel between just the Pandava and him, Karna would have killed Arjuna five times over. Duryodhana, the greatest archer in the world has left us and we are

all poorer for his going. Perhaps the Gods love him so much, they could not bear to have him away from them any longer.”

Duryodhana still cannot say a word; but listening to Shalya calms him a little. His chest does not heave as much and he no longer struggles to speak. Some semblance of quietness comes over him. But his eyes are still full of shock; they are desperate: everything is lost now, that Karna is dead.

Shalya says, “The enemy massacres our men. Even the sun is dim that Karna is dead. Shouldn’t we honor his passing by stopping the battle for today?”

Duryodhana can only nod slightly. Shalya sends word that the fighting should be stopped for the day in honor of Karna. He turns back to Duryodhana. “We saw the light of his soul rise into heaven. Your friend is at peace now; don’t grieve for him.”

Aswatthama and some others try to pacify Duryodhana, but he sits like a stone, only the tears flowing down his face. All night he sits like that.

The sun sets over Kurukshetra and Karna lies on the field of death. His body glows as if it is still alive and the smile on the lips of his severed head seems so alive as well. No one dares come near him as he lies there. They say he was the noblest man who lived in the world: rivers stand still when Karna dies, the sun loses his luster, the earth trembles and the sky turns crimson with grief. The planets wander from their orbits when Karna dies and comets flare across the sky, plain even by day. The Devas weep when that kshatriya falls, even they who are free from sorrow.

When he kills Karna, Arjuna raises his conch, the Devadatta and blows on it and Krishna sounds his Panchajanya. Neither blows a joyful note. It is as if they, his enemies who killed him, are sad he is gone. Arjuna feels a part of his own life has ended. So many years he had waited for this duel, since the day Karna first swaggered into the exhibition in Hastinapura and stole his thunder. Now his enemy is dead and least of all Arjuna can believe that by killing Karna, he, the Pandava, has proved he is the better archer. All that hardly matters any more; inexplicable sorrow lays hold of Arjuna.

Yet, there is no taking anything away from his triumph. The last warrior who stood between the Pandavas and victory has fallen and their army celebrates his death. Yudhishtira had come out to watch the duel between Karna and Arjuna; but the pain of his wounds forced him back to his tent.

Arjuna and Krishna make their way to Yudhishtira’s tent through a sea of soldiers, all shouting both their names and those near enough reaching out to

touch their heroes.

The news reaches Yudhishtira before they do and he is waiting for them in a fair tumult of joy. Arjuna leaps down from his chariot, runs to his brother, his guru and prostrates himself at his feet.

With a sob, Yudhishtira raises him up and embraces him. Yudhishtira clasps Krishna. Krishna says, “With Karna, Duryodhana’s last hope has died. Yudhishtira, your wrath of thirteen years burns brightly and it consumes the Kauravas. Already, you are lord of the earth again.”

Yudhishtira, the bhakta, says humbly, “You have won this war for me. You are always my hope and my strength. When you are with me, victory must be mine.”

Yudhishtira is deeply relieved; some peace comes to his spirit. It was always Karna he had feared, Karna who had been Duryodhana’s main hope. The eldest Kaurava and the eldest Pandava knew, instinctively, how great Karna was; and the duel that would decide the outcome of the war would be the one between Arjuna and him. Now it is over and Yudhishtira wants to be driven to the place where Karna fell. He wants to see the corpse of the man who haunted him with anxiety for so many years. He wants to see it with his own eyes.

Krishna takes him to the field in his chariot. The Pandava sees Karna’s sons all lying dead and then at last he sees Karna himself, his head cut from his body and restored to calm, after life’s brief, harsh, fever. He sees the great body pierced all over by arrows, like a kadamba flower with its thousand filaments. He sees the thousand lamps lit around that headless trunk, fed by scented oil. A pang grips him and Yudhishtira stands gazing at his dead brother. The Sun is setting behind the western mountain, slanting his last light across his slain child’s face, when finally, the Pandava heaves a sigh and says softly, “He is dead and he is so splendid even in death. Come, Krishna, let us go back.”

ELEVEN

OUT UNDER THE MOON

The sun sets, but Duryodhana sits unmoving in his tent, paralyzed. His mind is also blank, until he remembers the day of the exhibition in Hastinapura again, the day he first saw Karna. How glorious Karna had been on that day, when he put Arjuna in the shade. Duryodhana sees his friend once more. He sees him so clearly, he can reach out and touch his face.

A sob tears itself out from the Kaurava's very entrails. The vision of the exhibition fades and that of Karna with it. He remembers where he is and what has happened. It is midnight now and no one is about. A stark compulsion seizes Duryodhana: he has to see Karna at once. Not caring to cover himself against the cold, he stumbles out into the night. Like a beast of the wild to its dead mate, Duryodhana runs to where Karna lies.

A bronze moon has risen into the sky and hangs low over Kurukshetra. By its burnished light, Duryodhana finds his friend, cut in two by Arjuna's arrow. Tenderly, the Kaurava picks up the severed head. He strokes its handsome face, its eyes shut in sleep forever. He kisses those eyes, the proud lips curled in their last smile, mocking death. Duryodhana gathers Karna's headless trunk in his arms and sits on the ground, mourning.

Suddenly panic grips him. He jumps up like a madman and dashes here and there, sobbing and laughing, crying Karna's name to the moon. He plunges across the field, falling over the corpses of Kurukshetra, while grief dissects his heart. Summoned by a subtle impulse, Duryodhana runs to his Pitama on his bed of arrows. Sobbing, he falls to his knees beside Bheeshma.

Painfully, the patriarch stirs. He reaches out a gnarled hand and strokes Duryodhana's head. Tears in his aged eyes, he says, "Don't grieve for Karna, my child. His death was fated and he is happy now. He was a kshatriya and he died as a kshatriya should. He is at peace."

Duryodhana stiffens. His voice quivering with excitement, he whispers, "So I was right! Karna was a kshatriya, all along. Tell me who he was, whose son. I must know everything. Tell me, Pitama! I must tell the world. At least now let them know he was a kshatriya and they taunted him vainly."

His hand trembles in the patriarch's. Bheeshma says, "I cannot tell you who Karna was, unless you swear you will tell no one else. It was his own wish that

no one should know; not even you, until he was dead.”

Puzzled, that Karna kept something from him that Bheeshma knew, Duryodhana says, “If he wanted it kept a secret, would I ever tell anyone? I swear it will not pass my lips. Tell me, Pitama!”

Bheeshma hesitates. “Can you bear what I have to tell you? You are already unhinged with grief.”

Duryodhana says, “I have seen Karna lying on the field with his head cut from his body and I am still alive. My heart is made of stone; it can bear anything. Tell me, Pitama, who was he?”

His grandsire says, “Listen, then. I will tell you because you must know how much he loved you. Duryodhana, Karna was Kunti’s eldest son.”

Duryodhana reels. He clutches Bheeshma’s hand and breathes, “The Pandavas’ brother! Tell me more.”

Under the witnessing moon, Bheeshma tells him all about Karna’s tragic life. He tells him about Surya Deva, whom Kunti invoked and of the child born of the Sun’s visitation. He tells him how Kunti floated her infant on the river, how Atiratha saw the wooden box and took the golden child home. Of Karna’s dreams, Bheeshma tells the Kaurava and how he discovered he was not the suta’s son; how he wanted to be an archer and was refused by every master in the land, until he went to Parasurama. Bheeshma tells Duryodhana about Bhargava’s curse and the brahmana’s, how Karna gave away his kavacha and kundala to Indra and, finally, when Karna himself discovered who he was, when Krishna told him. The Kuru patriarch tells Duryodhana how, just before the war, Kunti went to her firstborn son and begged him to join his brothers’ army, as their king. Bheeshma tells Duryodhana what Karna’s answer had been. ‘I will never abandon Duryodhana. He is the only one who ever loved me and I love him more than my life.’

Duryodhana listens to him in silence, his tears dripping onto the old man’s hands. Bheeshma falls silent. Duryodhana says, “He knew and he still stayed with me. He died by his own brother’s hand for my sake, because he loved me so much. Why am I not dead? Why doesn’t this heartless earth open and swallow me for what I have done?”

Duryodhana whispers feverishly, “Karna, my friend, there is nothing left to live for when you are gone. Not now, that I know how you loved me: more than I had dreamt. I am coming to you soon, my brother, very soon.”

Bheeshma says, “Karna was the noblest man that lived in our times and he

has found the heaven he deserves.”

Duryodhana says quietly, “Nothing can hurt me now that I have heard who my Karna was and what he did for me. Pitama, I do not want the kingdom any more, for which this war is being fought. Now that Karna is not here, with whom I can share it, I don’t want it at all. I want nothing but to die and I will die a noble death. You will see, Pitama, how this grandson of yours dies. You will be proud of me. I promise you: at last, you will be proud of your Duryodhana. I must leave you now, I must prepare for death.”

A smile lights Duryodhana’s face, one of such relief, almost of peace: the smile of a man who has finally found his true direction. He kisses Bheeshma’s hand, then, rises quickly and walks away. Bheeshma lies on his incredible bed under the moon and his tears flow for his grandson, for all his grandsons. There is also a new light in his eyes. He can feel the war drawn near its end and his own life, as well.

BOOK NINE

SHALYA PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

KRIPA AND HIS SISHYA

The next day, with the rising sun, Acharya Kripa comes to Duryodhana's tent. He finds the Kaurava wide awake, his eyes red, intent. Obviously, he has not slept all night. Kripa takes Duryodhana's hand and speaks to him.

"Curb your sorrow, my prince, it drains you. How cruel this kshatriya dharma is, which venerates killing and dying above everything else. Just look at you, my poor child. I have seen you since you were an infant and look at the pass you have reached. Duryodhana, real dharma is to protect precious life, not destroy it.

You know how fond Aswatthama and I are of you. Listen to an old man that loves you. When this war began you had the bigger army and you were certain of victory. That is not how it has turned out. Bheeshma fell, then Drona was killed and now Karna is dead. So many of your brothers are dead and your son Lakshmana. At least now, you must realize that Arjuna is invincible. Krishna is his sarathy and no one can stop him.

Look at your army today: like stragglers of a caravan attacked by bandits. Do you remember what it was, eighteen days ago? How many men have perished, how many noble kshatriyas. We were all there when Dusasana was killed; none of us could stop Bheema. We were all there when Jayadratha died; could we stop Arjuna then? The truth is that you are in the wrong and dharma is against you.

How can you hope to win this war? Duryodhana, even now it is not too late. You still have that most precious treasure: you have your life. Don't throw it away.

Go to Yudhishtira; offer him peace. He will welcome you, share the kingdom with you. Krishna will welcome peace. The rishis say you must fight only when you are strong. When you are weak, peace is the sensible course. You will still save thousands of lives and every living soldier on Kurukshetra will bless you. I beg you, Duryodhana, listen to me!"

Kripa is so overwrought his eyes roll up and he faints. Duryodhana revives his Acharya, sprinkling water on his face. Kripa wakes and still sobs. Duryodhana takes his old master's hand and says kindly, "Only you, who love me, will speak like this. Everything you say is true. Before the war began, you

spoke strongly against it; once battle was joined, no one fought as you did. I saw you, always in the van of our legions, like a man half your age. You are my first guru. Drona came much later. You were my master since the day I was born and you speak not out of fear or ambition, only love.

But it is too late to think of peace. We are men of the world. We know how much the Pandavas have suffered at my hands. Think just of the day of the dice. How will they ever forgive me for what happened on that day? This war has opened my eyes. Once, I only thought of what I wanted and I would do anything to get it. Today I can almost feel the Pandavas' pain in my own body.

Bheema and I played together as boys. I confess to you now, he was always an affectionate fellow, wild but loving. Did you see what he did to Dusasana yesterday? Did you see the look in his eyes when he cut off my brother's hand, ripped open his chest and drank his blood? What rage he must have carried in his heart, for thirteen years, that a loving man like him could do a thing like that. You think Bheema will forgive me? Never.

Then, think of Abhimanyu. Perhaps if he had not died, we could still have sued for peace with the Pandavas. Now, even if they do make peace, do you think Krishna and Arjuna will forget how Abhimanyu was killed? And do you think Bheema and the others will forgive what we did to Draupadi on the day of the dice? She will never forgive us. She has sworn she will sleep only on the floor until Bheema kills me.

Acharya, your love blinds you with hope. Peace is impossible, let us not even think of it. The Pandavas have suffered too long and too much to accept peace now. Besides, I do not want peace.

Perhaps you are right and they might still settle for peace. Yudhishtira is so full of dharma, that if I make the offer he may accept it. Krishna and Arjuna might forgive me for Abhimanyu's death, since I have also lost my brothers and my son. But what will I do with peace, Acharya? You forget that for thirteen years I have ruled the earth myself. How can I bear to share it with anyone? And it will hardly be an equal sharing. Yudhishtira and his brothers will rule and I will be no better than their servant. I have shone alone all these years, dimming the glory of every other king in Bharatavarsha. How can I bear to walk behind my cousin now? Think of the shame of it. It will be far worse than dying.

Yes, I have ruled the earth these thirteen years and mine has been a splendid reign. Do you think that otherwise all these lords of men would have come with their armies to fight for me? Many more came for me than for Yudhishtira. I have tasted power like no other man. I have known wealth and luxury that even

other kings hardly dream of. I have given away as charity more than many kings own in all their lives. And now you want me to be my cousin's subject and to rule half a kingdom, if that, at his mercy? Ah Kripa, you mean well, but the dying man does not relish the bitter medicine that can cure him.

I am set on war and for me it is the only course. I might be many things, Acharya, but I am not a coward. I have never been afraid of anyone. I have lived the life of a great king: no pleasure I have not tasted in surfeit. I have the blessings of my poor because I have been generous in charity. Night and day, since I was a boy, I have heard the Vedas chanted; and you know how many yagnas I have performed. I have set my foot on my enemies' heads and I have been munificent with my own. I never turned away any man who came to me in need. My conquests are numberless and far-flung and I ruled my kingdom ably. Which man who has lived the life I have will willingly serve the rest of his years as the Pandavas' slave?

So many of my friends and my brothers are dead: all those that wanted me to rule the earth. They died for my sake, as kshatriyas should. In this fleeting world, where everything is always dying, only honor matters. I will not sacrifice my honor to save my life and live in misery under another man's yoke. Karna always said only honor was worth striving for, since only honor is immortal. If I die fighting on Kurukshetra, all my sins will be washed from me and I will have honor forever. A ksha-triya should die in battle, not of old age and sickness.

My mind is made up. My friends have given their lives for me and the only way I can repay the debt I owe them is to follow them out of this world. For my sake, Bheeshma lies dying. Drona has fallen for me and Karna, Jayadratha, all my brothers and millions more. Each of those deaths is an arrow in my heart. I must go to those who have died for me. The only thing that could have held me back is love for my kingdom. But when Karna died, the kingdom I meant to share with him lost its last attraction. I have enjoyed a kingdom for long enough and care nothing for it any more. How can I even dream of making peace with the Pandavas, after they have killed those who loved me? That would be ingratitude past forgiving.

No, death is my only way. You should not grieve for me. I am beyond caring for life, indeed, I am impatient to die. When Karna perished, my heart went with him. I am hardly alive any more; my life is a hollow thing without my friend. He was the noblest man that ever lived. I cannot live without him and all I want is to be with him again. Acharya, you cannot wish it on me to die in a sickbed, surrounded by wailing women. That is not the kshatriya's way. Forgive

me, but I cannot make peace with the Pandavas.”

Duryodhana falls silent. For just a moment, Kripa is sure he detects something like regret in the Kaurava’s voice: genuine regret that he cannot make peace with his cousins. The harshness and hatred have vanished from Duryodhana and the best in him seems to shine forth after what he has suffered on Kurukshetra. It is as if he is exorcised of all his demons; Kripa thinks sadly that of all the Kuru princes this one, as he is now, is the most lovable. Amazing gentleness sits on Duryodhana and Kripa sighs and says nothing more. There is still the war to be fought and they must choose a new Senapati to replace Karna.

TWO

TAMELESS SHALYA

The Kaurava warriors have just finished their morning ablutions in the Saraswati, colored by dawn. Their bodies burn as if with fever and the night-chilled water hardly refreshes them. Duryodhana comes to the river and calls Aswatthama. “You are the wisest of us, my friend¹. Tell me, whom should I make our Senapati?”

Without hesitation Aswatthama says, “Shalya. He is powerful and experienced and he is devoted to you. At last count, we still outnumber the Pandava army. With Shalya as our general, we can win this war even now.”

Duryodhana approaches Shalya, who has just finished worshipping the sun and is wading out of the golden river. The Kaurava folds his hands and says humbly, “I beg you, be master of the Kuru army. Hope is not lost, my lord, you must lead us to victory.”

Shalya says, “Yesterday, before he died, Karna asked me what I would do if he were killed. I said to him he could not be killed; but if he was, I would avenge him by killing Krishna and Arjuna.” He chokes, “He was the best man I ever knew and I must keep my word to him. Shalya is a kshatriya, Duryodhana; even Arjuna will not stand against me. I will either win this war for you yet, or die try^{ing}.”

Shalya is given the ceremonial bath and made Senapati of the Kaurava army. Some semblance of hope returns to Duryodhana’s legions and they shout Shalya’s name and blow their conches and beat their drums to embolden themselves. Across Kurukshetra, Yudhishtira hears the sounds and says, “They have made Shalya their Senapati. He has never been defeated in battle, how will we face him?”

Krishna says, “Shalya² is formidable. In some ways, he is more of a warrior than Bheeshma, Drona or Karna. He is a powerful archer and he fights with the mace as well as Bheema. Then, there is something else about him, a thing of fate and not Bheema, Arjuna, Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi, Nakula or Sahadeva can kill him. Shalya’s death is written at the hands of only one kshatriya in the Pandava army.”

“Who is he, Krishna?”

Krishna smiles, “Why, you, Yudhishtira. Forget he is Sahadeva and

Nakula's uncle; you must kill him if this war is to end. Dharma is with you, you will not fail."

Shalya deploys Duryodhana's dwindled legions in a complex vyuha. At its hub, he collects the few maharathikas that remain: Kripa, Aswatthama, Shakuni, Kritavarman, Duryodhana and the handful of his brothers that Bheema has left alive. Before they ride out to battle, they confer among themselves and Shalya decides, "We will not fight duels, if we can help it. Each man will fight for the others and they for him. We will attack the Pandavas together and try and kill them all at once."

It is the eighteenth day of the dharma yuddha. The conches echo yet again and the two hosts fall at each other. Seventeen fearsome days of battle have whittled both armies. When the war began, Duryodhana had a hundred thousand chariots, seventeen thousand elephants, two hundred thousand horses and six million footsoldiers; and the Pandavas had sixty thousand chariots, six thousand elephants, a hundred thousand horses and four million footsoldiers. Now those numbers are a few thousands each: of chariots, horse, elephant and some more thousands of footsoldiers, at most.

When the Pandavas see Shalya has gathered all his best warriors at the center of his vyuha, they divide their army in three phalanxes, with Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi and Satyaki leading one each. At the head of his army today and leading all the rest, rides Yudhishtira, impatient to kill Shalya. Nakula and Sahadeva ride at his chariot-wheels.

Dashing Kritavarman breaks on the Pandava lines and only Arjuna can face the Yadava. Bheema comes up against Kripa. However, these encounters do not develop into prolonged duels. The Kau-rava warriors wheel away from any Pandava who challenges them for too long and they ride quickly to help one another.

Yudhishtira and Shalya fight the only real duel and the Pandava finds Shalya implacable, more than he can endure. Seeing his brother pressed hard, Bheema rides to his side. Meanwhile, Karna's son, Chitrasena and Nakula face each other. Chitrasena fights with some of his father's valor, but Karna's death has made him sadder than the youth can bear. At one point, he smashes Nakula's chariot with a volley reminiscent of Karna's finest. Nakula leaps down in fury, his sword drawn and rushes at the bewildered Chitrasena. Before the prince can recover from his surprise, Nakula springs up on to his chariot, seizes his nephew by his hair and cuts his throat.

The slain prince's brothers, Sushena and Satyasena, attack Nakula. But the

Pandava's blood is up and he kills them both in moments, with exact arrows. Seeing Shalya beset by all the Pandavas now, Kripa, Kritavarman, Shakuni and Aswatthama fly to his side. Kritavarman strikes Bheema deep in his chest, so he staggers back, the mace falling from his hand.

Acharya Kripa severs Dhrishtadyumna's bowstring, from far away and Aswatthama easily holds up Nakula and Sahadeva. Only Yudhishtira fights the grand Shalya again. When Bheema falters briefly in his chariot, Kritavarman kills his horses. Growling, Bheema leaps down from his ratha, mace in hand and runs at Kritavarman. He strikes the Yadava's horses down so they fall without a sound. He is too close to shoot at with arrows and Kritavarman jumps down behind his chariot and runs.

The smoldering Bheema turns on Shalya again. He smashes down the Kaurava Senapati's white horses. With a roar, Shalya hurls a javelin at him. Bheema dances aside and catches the hurtling lance in flight. Quick as thinking, he turns and flings it back at Shalya's sarathy, so the man falls off his chariot-head to avoid being transfixed.

Shalya seizes up his mace and leaps down to the ground to face Bheema. Mace rings against mace and the titans are covered in sparks. Kurukshetra quakes. The battle all around them pauses, as the soldiers come to watch. The two fight on with elemental blows and it seems neither will prevail. Then, both Bheema and Shalya find a gap in each other's defenses, at the same moment, with seismic strokes: each is knocked unconscious by the other's blow!

Kripa swoops on the fallen Shalya, lifts him into his chariot and rides away. Bheema lies where he fell, for a while. Then his eyes flutter open. He takes a moment to recall where he is and jumps up with a roar, the mace still in his hand, "Shalya! I am not finished with you. Come and fight!"

He is comical, standing there so fierce, while his opponent has gone; some laughter breaks out around him, some relief in the relentless horror.

Elsewhere, Shalya mounts a new chariot and rides back to battle. Now he fights twice as ferociously as before, as if being knocked unconscious by Bheema has roused him. There are notably few duels today. Instead, the kshatriyas all concentrate on attacking the enemy army and killing as many men as they can. From a boundless theater for heroic duels, the war becomes a contention of fading numbers. The Kaurava Senapati, Shalya, is untameable. Watching him, hope flickers up again in Duryodhana that he may still win this war.

For the other side, Satyaki fights as boldly and Dhrishtadyumna is awesome. Bheema and Arjuna are quenchless, as well and no one can contain them. But nobody burns as brilliantly as Shalya today and Yudhishtira is anxious. If the Kaurava Senapati is allowed to continue, the already reduced Pan-dava army will evaporate entirely. Yudhishtira mutters to himself, 'Can Krishna be wrong?' He shakes his head. 'No, Krishna is never wrong. I must kill him myself.'

Yudhishtira sees Sahadeva and Nakula flit to Bheema's side. He sees Shalya hold them off, easily, while killing a hundred Pandava soldiers. Yudhishtira sees Aswatthama ride against Arjuna and cover Krishna's chariot in a web of silver shafts. His chest heaving, he sounds his conch to call his brothers off the field.

They come at once and he says to them, "Krishna says that only I can kill Shalya; and so I will, or die trying. Satyaki, my friend, guard my right wheel. Dhrishtadyumna, watch my left. Bheema, you ride before me and Arjuna you come after me."

Flanked by four majestic kshatriyas, Yudhishtira comes to kill Shalya. A duel develops. As if he senses death near him, Shalya is more than magnificent. He looks like Saturn duelling with the Moon. But it is Yudhishtira who surprises everyone. His lips pursed, his eyes flaming, he is like Indra come down to Kurukshetra. Soon after they begin, Yudhishtira ruins Shalya's chariot with a smoking volley. Fortunately for that king, the Kauravas have gathered around him and quickly he is back in another chariot, fighting more powerfully than ever.

Still, Yudhishtira takes everyone's breath away. Five times he snaps Shalya's bowstring and then, once, strikes him with a torrent of arrows, so that king swoons; his horses are killed and his banner cut down. Luckily, Aswatthama is near and whisks him from the field. When Shalya is away Bheema straddles Kurukshetra, killing a thousand men. The fighting spreads out again. All around Bheema ring the roars and screams of those that kill and are killed.

When he recovers, Shalya rides back into battle for the last time. He makes straight for Yudhishtira. He rakes the Pandava with a hundred arrows, in a moment. The serene Yudhishtira replies with nine perfect shafts, which disjoint Shalya's armor so it falls away. Shalya cracks the Pandava's bow. Next moment he, too, cuts away Yudhishtira's golden armor and kills his horses. Flying up just then, Kripa kills Yudhishtira's sarathy.

Bheema is at hand to protect his precious brother. He breaks Shalya's bow,

kills his horses with a terrific volley and his sarathy by flinging his mace at the man's head. Undaunted, Shalya draws his sword, picks up his shield and leaps out of his broken chariot. He runs straight at Yudhishtira, whose death can still win the war for Duryodhana. Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki and Shikhandi surround Shalya, so he cannot escape and no Kaurava warrior can rescue him. No thought of escape crosses Shalya's mind, he runs wildly at the Pandava king.

Bheema smashes his sword and blows his shield to bits. Shalya stands briefly surprised and defenseless. Then he charges Yudhishtira again, with bare hands now. Not pausing to think, Yudhishtira finds himself reaching for a silver, jewel-studded lance beside him. He casts it at the Kaurava Senapati, as Karttikeya once did his spear of agni. It pierces Shalya's chest like a serpent flashing into its hole. He falls with his arms spread wide, as if he embraced the earth, one last time, before he left her. With an echoing roar, Shalya dies.

THREE

THE LAST MEN

When their king dies, Shalya's legion breaks away from the rest of the Kaurava army and rushes at the Pandavas. Duryodhana cries to them to wait, they must all fight together. They will not listen. Yudhishtira and his triumphant kshatriyas pick Shalya's men off easily and yet another Kaurava legion perishes.

Panic takes the other Kaurava soldiers. Their nerve gone, they turn to run. Duryodhana looms behind them in his chariot and speaks to them in a voice like the sea. "Is it from death that you flee? Death will hunt you down anyway, whether in war or in peace. It is better to die as heroes and find heaven, my friends. Why do you fear these Pandavas? I will show you how to win this war. Ride with me and victory shall be ours!"

He charges the enemy and what remains of his army, twenty-one thousand men, follows him into battle again. Duryodhana fights like a dark Deva on Kurukshetra. For a while it seems he will win the war single-handedly. By himself, he holds up Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna, Bheema, Arjuna, Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva.

His uncle Shakuni appears beside him and he fights like ten men today! On Shakuni's other side, his son Uluka is as formidable as his father is. Between them, these three drive the five Pandavas back. Seeing them, Duryodhana's brothers, the handful Bheema has left alive, rally round, their bows singing. But when Bheema sees these sons of Dhritarashtra, he throws back his head and gives a familiar roar of delight. A smile spreading on his face, Bheema comes like a comet from the Pandava ranks, flying to keep his oath!

Some of Duryodhana's brothers try to run. Bheema catches them. He kills them all, their blood splashing in the sun, staining the brown field. Soon, of Dhritarashtra's hundred sons, only Duryodhana and his brother Sudarshana are left alive.

The eighteenth day hurtles on, with men dying like rain-flies. With some incandescent archery, Arjuna decimates the scant remains of the tenacious Trigartas and just Susharma is left alive. A sharp duel ensues, but Susharma's spirit is broken with all the defeat inflicted on him. Arjuna puts an end to that king with an arrow that tears his chest open and blows his heart to shreds.

Bheema dances among what remains of Duryodhana's elephant army. He

crashes the beasts down with huge strokes of his mace, then, dispatches their riders like insects. When almost all the elephant legion is razed, Bheema, covered in blood, turns his burning gaze to Duryodhana and Sudarshana. He climbs into his chariot again and, with Arjuna and some others around him, rides at the last two Kauravas left for him to kill. As he draws near, he roars at Sudarshana to attract his attention. Even as that prince swirls around to face him, Bheema sloughs off his head with a crescent-tipped arrow, once favored by their master Drona.

Of his hundred brothers only Duryodhana remains and a gory, triumphant Bheema rides at his cousin to end it all. Just in time, Shakuni blunders between them with his son Uluka and the last elephants of the Kaurava army. Nakula and Sahadeva appear at Bheema's side and they engage Shakuni and Uluka. Fine power upon him, Nakula caparisons Uluka's elephant in a sheen of arrows. Uluka strikes Nakula with thirty shafts and covers the raging Bheema with seventy more, drawing blood in a hundred fonts. Nakula seizes a slender spear and casts it at Uluka like sorcery. With his father looking on, the golden lance decapitates Uluka and his corpse tumbles off his grey beast's back.

Shakuni's scream echoes around Kurukshetra. His eyes welling blind, he turns on Nakula's twin: Sahadeva who had sworn to kill him on the day of the game of dice. With every weapon he has, Shakuni attacks Sahadeva. The Pandava smashes all his missiles and fells his elephant. Shakuni climbs into a chariot and, his nerve gone, tries to escape. But Sahadeva is determined to keep his vow. He pursues the Gandhara, crying, "Stop and fight, coward! You are the cause of this war, of all this misery. If you had never come to Hastinapura, Duryodhana would not have become the monster he did.

You laughed at the oaths we swore when you banished us. Who is laughable now, Gandhara? Dusasana is dead, Karna is gone. Look where your son lies without his head. Come, Shakuni, pay for your sins. Let me pluck your head from your neck like a fruit from a tree. I am happy that I can kill the most evil of all our enemies."

Knowing there is nowhere to run, Shakuni turns. They fight a short, scathing duel. Then, Sahadeva picks up a javelin, with golden wings and casts it at Shakuni. It cuts Gandhara king's head from his throat and Shakuni dies, his hooded eyes staring, still full of malice.

Celebration breaks out among the Pandava legions and absolute panic among the Kaurava soldiers that remain alive. Duryodhana's men flee in that frenzy and once more the Kaurava looms threateningly behind them and brings

them back to fight. But with Shakuni, the last ember of hope dies in Duryodhana. Surely, now, only one thing remains: to die himself.

Of his eleven teeming aksauhinis, of millions, just two hundred chariots, five hundred horses, a hundred elephants and three thousand footsoldiers remain. For his sake, they come back into battle. Duryodhana watches the Pandavas make short work of his final legion, scattering its corpses on Kurukshetra as the wind does blades of grass.

Of eleven immense legions just Duryodhana, Kripa, Aswatthama and Kritavarman are still alive. Of the seven Pandava aksauhinis, two hundred chariots, seven hundred elephants, five thousand horses and some ten thousand footsoldiers remain. The blood of more than ten million kshatriyas soaks Kurukshetra, field of dharma. Most of the noblest bloodlines of the earth have been extinguished. The race of kings has been destroyed forever; an age has ended.

FOUR

THE DWAIPAYANA LAKE

Duryodhana surveys the field of Kurukshetra, the ruin of kshatriya kind. He realizes what Vidura had meant when he said to him, “You will destroy the race of kings.”

Duryodhana’s head reels. He wonders if Vidura had seen, in his mind’s eye, the spectacle he now confronted himself. The Kaurava sits astride a horse, an animal wounded by many arrows. Then, even that beast folds under him and falls dead. Now he is truly alone. Sobbing like an orphaned child, when this final companion also left him, Duryodhana staggers away from Kurukshetra.

His mind ranges over the past eighteen days, but no grief touches his heart for the millions who had died for him. Only one face rises before his eyes: how Karna must have suffered when he knew the Pandavas were his brothers! Yet, he had not abandoned Duryodhana. Where would he find another Karna in this world? Nowhere, even if he lived a hundred lives. As he walks dimly on, hardly knowing where he goes, Duryodhana’s body begins to burn as if a rain of fire fell on him.

He sees a blue lake ahead. Then all he wants to do is cool the fire in his body in the water, to immerse himself forever. Eighteen days ago, he had six million men to fight his cause. Now Duryodhana has his mace in his hand and it is his only guardian. For a moment, he stands gazing at the lake, somehow unable to move into it yet.

Just then, Sanjaya comes running through that place. He stops still to see Duryodhana standing there, lost, his eyes full of tears. Before him is the man who was sovereign of the earth a few days ago.

Now he stands bereft, alone. His father’s sarathy approaches Duryodhana and says, “My lord, it is I, Sanjaya.”

Duryodhana turns slowly, like a dreamer. A smile lights his face and he embraces Sanjaya fervently. “Thank God you have escaped with your life!”

Duryodhana holds Sanjaya’s hand, as if it were his own sanity. Sanjaya says, “When they had finished killing all our soldiers, the Pandavas arrived in our camp to look for you. They found only me and Satyaki took me prisoner. When Dhrishtadyumna saw me, he began to laugh. He said, ‘What are you going to do with this poor fellow? What does it matter any more if he lives or dies?’

Satyaki growled, 'I will kill him then.'

The Yadava raised his sword when, suddenly, Vyasa muni appeared there and said, 'This man must not be killed; let him go back to Dhritarashtra.' Reluctantly Satyaki released me and I ran away before he changed his mind."

Sanjaya sees the blank look in Duryodhana's eyes and cries, "But, my lord, I cannot bear to see you like this. I fear your mind is unhinged after what has happened."

Duryodhana smiles, "Ah, Sanjaya, if only I could lose my mind! I would be spared this agony. Look at me now: I have no one left, no one to even cry for me. Why, I can hardly cry myself."

Duryodhana falls silent for a moment, then, says, "Go to my father, good Sanjaya, tell him his son Duryodhana sent him a message. Tell him I have entered the Dwaipayana lake, because my body burns and I mean to submerge myself to cool my limbs. Anyway, of what use is my life when all my brothers and my friends are dead? And the Pandavas have won the war.

Sanjaya, tell my father I will never see him again in this world and say his son begs his forgiveness for all the grief I have caused him. He has always loved me and I am sure he will forgive me. Then go to my mother Gandhari and tell her that her Duryodhana says he is not fit to be the son of a great soul like her. Tell her that I, who have never bent before anyone in my life, now set my head at her feet and beg her forgiveness. And tell her I have just one prayer left: that in every life to come, I am born her son. Go now, my friend. I must cool my limbs for a while, ah, they are on fire! Let me enter the water before anyone else finds me. I must cool myself, Sanjaya, I must cool my burning body."

Mace in hand, he walks slowly into the lake until it covers his head. He makes the blue water still above him; he knows the secret art of not breathing for as long as he wants. Sanjaya stands a moment, gazing sadly after him, then the sarathy turns and makes for Hastinapura again.

On his way, he meets Kripa, Kritavarman and Aswatthama. They say to him, "You are lucky to be alive, Sanjaya. Have you seen Duryodhana anywhere? Is he alive?"

Sanjaya tells them how Duryodhana had submerged himself in the Dwaipayana lake. "He said his body was burning and he needed to cool it."

Aswatthama cries, "He thinks we are also dead. The four of us could still kill the Pandavas!"

Suddenly, they hear the voices of men coming toward them through the trees. It is some Pandava soldiers searching for Duryodhana and the four vanish into the forest.

Celebrations rule the Pandava camp. The war is won and Yudhishtira is lord of the earth. The cost has been stupendous, but victory belongs to them. Meanwhile, the Kuru princesses are sent home to Hastinaoura in palanquins and carts, the widows wailing, pulling their hair and raking their breasts with their nails. It takes the Pandavas a while to realize that Duryodhana is nowhere to be found; when they do, they send their men out in every direction to look for him.

Duryodhana's horse is discovered, dead, but there is no sign anywhere of its master. They never dreamt he was a coward; yet, now, there is no trace of him and it seems he has run away. The Pandava soldiers comb the woods around Kurukshetra, but they do not find the Kaurava. Evening sets in and they return to Yudhishtira's camp, having failed their mission.

When the enemy soldiers have gone, Kripa, Aswatthama and Kritavarman come quietly to the lake. They call, "Come out, Duryodhana, we three are alive."

There is no reply. Aswatthama says, "The four of us can still win this war. The Pandavas have hardly any army left. If we win, you will be king; if we lose, we will find Devaloka for ourselves. Come out from the water and lead us to victory!"

For a moment, there is no answer. Then Duryodhana's voice speaks to them softly from the lake. "I am so happy you are alive. Yes, my loyal friends, we will fight the Pandavas and kill them yet. But not tonight. Darkness has fallen and my body is on fire with the wounds I have received. I am exhausted and so are you and my mind is full of sorrow. The lake waters will revive me in the night; tomorrow we will fight the Pandavas again and destroy them. We shall win this war yet.

More than anything, I am moved that you are still loyal to me. I cannot think what I have done to deserve such love. That will suffice for me tonight; tomorrow, we will face the enemy."

Aswatthama is impatient. "Why wait until tomorrow, my lord? Let us fight them now. I swear we will kill them all!"

The three do not notice the knot of vetalas, carrying loads of fresh meat from their hunt, who have come to Dwaipayana lake to drink its sweet water. The hunters move as silently as wild animals. They stand hidden in the trees, listening to every word Kripa, Kritavarman and Aswatthama say. At first, they

wonder whom the warriors address. Then they hear Duryodhana's ghostly voice float out of the silken water. Those hunters had heard the Pandavas are looking for Duryodhana, when they came across some of Yudhishtira's men scouring the forest for the Kaurava.

They melt back into the jungle and run through evening's shadows toward the Pandava camp. The hunters arrive at Bheema's tent. The guards outside try to stop them, but they barge in. When Bheema hears their news, he brings the foresters to Yudhishtira.

Yudhishtira rewards the vetalas and sends them on their way. The Pandavas set out at once, with Krishna leading them. Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Draupadi's sons, Yuddhamanyu and Uttamaujas and Shikhandi go with them to the lake. The sun is low in the western sky; dusk is upon the world. Aswatthama hears the Pandavas coming. He says to Duryodhana, "The Pandavas are coming! We must hide."

Duryodhana's voice answers, "Go, my friends."

Kripa, Kritavarman and Aswatthama run from the lake. They find a large banyan tree in the depths of the jungle and sink down under it, exhausted. They speak in whispers among themselves, "What will happen now, will they find Duryodhana?"

"Will he fight them, if they do, or will he remain under water?" "It all depends on what the sons of Pandu decide."

FIVE

MAGNIFICENT DURYODHANA

The Pandavas arrive on the banks of the Dwaipayana lake. No ripple stirs its surface; the water lies smooth as a mirror.

Yudhishtira says, “Drona taught us how to do this: Duryodhana has used a siddhi to still the lake. He is under the water, hiding like a coward; but he will not escape today. Even if Indra comes to save him, I mean to send our cousin to the next world.”

Yudhishtira is trembling with the rage he has borne, so patiently, for thirteen years. Krishna says, “Then make him come out, Yudhishtira and kill him. Today, he must pay for everything.”

Yudhishtira comes to the edge of the lake and cries angrily, “How can you hide now, Suyodhana? Every kshatriya in Bharatavarsha has died for you. Your brothers are all dead, your uncle Shakuni is dead and you hide like a common coward. Where is your pride? Where is your honor? If you are a Kuru, come out and fight! Millions have died for you and here you are clinging to your life. Bheeshma lies dying, Drona is dead and your beloved sutaputra is gone. I had thought that if you are arrogant and envious, you are fearless too. Come out, cousin and fight like a kshatriya. If you kill us, you can still rule the world.”

A mocking laugh wafts out from the water. Duryodhana’s voice speaks to them. “You prate like a witless boy, Yudhishtira. How dare you think I fled the battle! I saw my brothers and my uncle die and I was dazed. I sat numbly on my horse, hardly aware of the world around me. The horse wandered away from Kurukshetra on his own and then he fell dead. I walked away from the beast, not knowing what I did or where I went. My body felt as if it was on fire and when I saw this lake, I thought I would cool my fevered limbs in it. You flatter yourself, cousin, to think I am hiding from you. As soon as I have rested, I will come out and we will fight. Meanwhile, you and your men must also be tired. You rest, as well and we will fight when we are fresh again.”

Yudhishtira is secretly pleased that his cousin is not, after all, afraid! Somehow, even he cannot bear to think of Duryodhana as being craven. The Pandava says, “We need no rest. We have been searching everywhere for you, come out and fight us.”

A pause, then, Duryodhana says, “Yudhishtira, I don’t want the kingdom

any more. Those with whom I meant to share and enjoy it are all dead. My brothers are dead. My Karna is gone. The earth has lost her splendor. I will fight you; yes, I will surely fight you. But you can have the kingdom: it means nothing to me any more, it is just some barren ground. I make a gift of this lusterless earth to you, Yudhishtira; it is yours to rule. And I will put on tree-bark and deerskin and spend the rest of my days in the jungle, seeking my peace.”

Yudhishtira roars, “Dare you! What right have you over the kingdom any more, that you presume to give it to me? Even if it were yours to give, I would never take it from you as a gift, but win it in battle. No kshatriya would rule a land that his enemy has given him.

Yet, there was a time when all this kingdom was yours to give. You were lord of the earth, when your uncle and you conspired to banish us for thirteen years. We came back from our exile and asked you gently to give back what was ours. Then you were not so magnanimous. When Krishna came to you as our messenger, the answer you sent with him was that you would not give us enough land to set on the point of a needle! Now, suddenly, you are the soul of generosity. You have lost your mind, Duryodhana. How else would the king of all the world, who wouldn’t give his cousins five towns, be ready now to part with his entire kingdom? Cousin, you have no kingdom left to give.

Yet, you still have one thing to lose. You have your life, Duryodhana and it is for your life I have come. Our long enmity must end today, for only one of us can be king in Hastinapura. After all that has happened, I do not mean to let you escape with your life today. So come out and fight.”

Yudhishtira’s voice sounds very different, so hard now. “This enmity between us has lasted too long. You have hated us since the day we first came to Hastinapura from the jungle. One way or another, you have done your best to destroy us. Today, all that must end. I will see you dead today and send you to swarga where you do not deserve to go. Come out and fight!” roars Yudhishtira.

Duryodhana stiffens under the lake. No one has dared speak to him like this in years, not since he became master of the earth. He is also taken aback, because it is the gentle Yudhishtira who speaks so harshly. There is nothing for it but to come out and fight.

Crafty to the end, Duryodhana says, “I marvel at this! All of you are men of dharma and you want to fight me all together, when I have no chariot, or a single soldier left. I don’t even have a bow or sword, only my mace. I have no armor and I am wounded. But I am not afraid of any of you. I do not fear Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna or even your Krishna. I will meet you all as the year does the

seasons and I will kill you all. Yet it saddens me that you, who call yourselves kshatriyas, have banded together to murder a defenseless man. Remember that a man takes only dharma out of this world with him; and you forsake dharma by this cowardice.

But that is your concern, not mine. I am a kshatriya and a Kuru and I am ready to fight you all and send you to your fathers. If I die, I will be the happiest man, because I will be with my Karna again. But what do you know about Karna, or that he was the noblest man who ever lived? I will kill all of you first, then take my own life. Prepare to die, I am coming!”

With a swirling of the water, Duryodhana emerges from the lake. He rises from the Dwaipayana lake as the sun does from the sea. He is majestic. His chest is as broad as a hill, his arms are splendid and his mace is laid across his shoulder. His eyes burn darker than ever and despite themselves, the Pandavas find themselves quivering with admiration as he wades calmly out of the water to face them.

Yudhishtira smiles. “I am proud that my cousin isn’t a coward, but a true Kuru after all!”

Duryodhana gains the shore and rasps, “I will fight you one at a time. You are men of dharma, you know what the dharma of kshatriyas is.”

“Do you mean the same dharma you used to kill Abhimanyu?” retorts Yudhishtira. “It seems only when the law applies to you it is meant to be observed. But as you say, we are men of dharma. So, Duryodhana, choose any one of us and choose your weapon. If you win, you can rule the earth again.”

There is a ripple of dismay among the others at the foolhardy offer. But that is Yudhishtira: as soon as he sees Duryodhana come out so bravely from the water, the Pandava’s rage leaves him. The Kaurava is his young cousin, once more and deserves a fair chance. Duryodhana stands there like a tiger eyeing a herd of cattle.

With a tight smile, he says, “It seems we are almost friends again at this final hour. I accept your offer! For my weapon, I choose this mace. As for my opponent, it makes no difference which of you I fight first: one by one, I will kill you all. Come, I am ready.”

Yudhishtira actually glows to hear him, so dauntless. He says, “Then fight me first. I will kill you and send you to Devaloka, where you now deserve to go for your courage!”

Duryodhana stands before them, his body covered in wounds that have

begun to bleed again. He is a mountain of sinister presence, cool and full of slow rage. A roar breaks from him at what Yudhishtira says, "Come then! I will fight any of you and send you all to hell. There is no one who can face me with a gada."

He stands there, red-eyed, bristling and growling like a great wild beast.

SIX

THE TWO COUSINS

Krishna takes Yudhishtira aside. The Dark One is trembling with rare fury. He lashes out at the Pan-dava, “I have never seen anyone as foolish as you! You dare challenge Duryodhana to a mace-fight? He will kill you before the fight even begins. It is no empty boast when he says no one can match him at the mace. For these thirteen years you were in exile, he practised every day, raining blows on an iron image of Bheema. Duryodhana’s mace blows are like thunder and lightning in Devaloka! Bheema is perhaps stronger than he is, but he has neither Duryodhana’s skill nor his long, hard practice.”

Krishna sighs. “This is turning into another game of dice. It seems you are determined you and your brothers will spend your lives in the jungle and Duryodhana will sit upon the throne of the world. Listen to me, if there is any of you who might be able to face Duryodhana it is only Bheema. And not even he can beat the Kaurava in a fair fight with maces. Oh, Yudhishtira, I despair for you and your dharma. Dharma is not meant to be carried to such insane lengths. After millions of men have died and the world is almost yours, you mean to give it all back with your foolishness!”

Krishna’s lips are pale with annoyance. Bheema says, “I will fight Duryodhana. More than any of us, he hates me. But I am stronger than he is and my mace is more powerful than his. I will kill him today, Krishna, nothing will stop me.”

Bheema speaks with such fervor that Krishna takes the big Pandava’s hand and cries, “Yes! You will kill him today, Bheema and only you can. You have killed the other ninety-nine Kauravas and you will kill Duryodhana as well. You must keep your oath. As much as your mace, let the anger of thirteen years be your weapon. Kill your cousin and lay the world at your brother’s feet. But be careful, Bheema, never for a moment think he will be easy to kill. There is no mace-fighter like Duryodhana; he is strong as a mountain and quick as a thought.”

Duryodhana stands growling still, ready for the last battle. He is determined to Salvage some honor from it for the rout on Kurukshetra. Bheema comes up to him and says, “I will fight you, Duryodhana and before we begin I want you to think back on everything you have made us suffer. Remember Varanavrata, the game of dice, how Dusasana dragged Panchali into the sabha in Hasti-napura.

Why, remember Kurukshetra, where the very race of kshatriyas has been destroyed. Bheeshma lies dying, Drona lies dead and the sutaputra graces the field, bright as a sun even in death. Our uncle Shalya lies there and your own brothers, glowing like embers of a great fire put out. Not only the kshatriyas, but dharma has perished on Kurukshetra; sishyas have killed gurus, uncles have killed nephews and cousins their cousins. We have cut down our Pitama on Kurukshetra and all this for your vanity.

The time has come to pay, Duryodhana. I am going to have revenge on you for every sin you ever committed. I am going to kill you.” Bheema’s voice is frightening, though he speaks so quietly.

Duryodhana listens to him in contempt, a brow arched, a sneer on his lips. The Kaurava laughs, “I never knew you were so eloquent, Bheema! I myself prefer deeds to words. How many years I have waited to kill you. I am pleased that you are man enough to fight, rather than letting one of your brothers be killed first. Don’t you see my mace like a cliff of Himavat? You will die, cousin: no one earth can fight me with a mace. Why, if the fight is fair, I think I could beat Indra. But of you five, certainly you are the most worthy adversary. After me, there was Shalya, until he died; and then there is you. Of course, my master Balarama is greater than any of us. It was he that said I am better than the rest of you put together. I am ready, Bheema. Let us begin.”

He speaks so boldly it would hardly seem that he stands alone against the others. Smiling at his cousin’s invincible arrogance, Yudhishtira brings him some armor and a crown to contain his long hair. Duryodhana takes these graciously. He has never hated Yudhsihtira; he even admires his noble nature, thinking that here is a worthy brother to his Karna. He had only fought Yudhishtira for kingdom, the wealth and power it brought. Bheema he has always loathed.

Duryodhana dons the golden mail. He sets the shining crown firmly on his head. And he is truly splendid: every inch a kshatriya and a king, glowing by the last rays of the setting sun as if his body was bathed in blood.

Bheema steps forward, mace in hand and the antagonists begin to circle each other warily. Before the first blow can be struck, they hear a conch and the approach of a chariot through the trees. They stop and turn to see their master, Balarama, arrive.

Krishna’s brother comes from a pilgrimage¹, which had taken him from Prabhasa to the source of the Saraswati, to all the tirthas along the Ganga and the Yamuna, to the Naimisa vana, down to the Sarayu, to Prayaga, on to bathe in the Gomati, to the Gandaki, to Gaya where he worshipped his ancestors, to Mount

Mahendra, to bathe in the seven streams of the Godavari, to the Vena, the Pampa and the river Bhima, to the Venkata mountain, to Kanchi, to Kamakoti, to bathe in the Kaveri, to Srirangam, Kanyakumari, the Panchaprana lake, to Kerala, Siva's Gokarna, Uma's island shrine, to the Dandaka vana and from there to the Narmada and back again to Prabhasa from where he set out. On his way back, he met Narada who told him of the gada-yuddha his sishtyas were about to fight, to the death of one of them. Duryodhana, of course, was the Yadava's favorite and the guru wanted to be present when the duel was fought.

Balarama arrives on the banks of the Dwaipayana lake. Krishna and the Pandavas greet him warmly. Duryodhana prostrates himself at his master's feet; he does not feel alone any more.

Balarama says, "I have heard Samantapanchaka is a most holy place upon the earth. It is near here. Let the gada-yuddha be fought there, for anyone who dies in Samantapanchaka goes straight to swarga."

Yudhishtira agrees and they set out for Samantapanchaka. It is such a spectacle: those kshatriyas moving through the trees like a pride of lions. Duryodhana saunters along at his ease with his cousins, his enemies, his gait regal, his mace across his shoulder. Krishna walks with Balarama, asking him about his tirtha-yatra and Satyaki brings up the rear, a few paces behind them.

SEVEN

AT SAMANTAPANCHAKA

At Samantapanchaka, the eternal northern altar of Brahma, the two titans are ready for battle. Both are Balarama's disciples, they are cousins and tigers of the royal House of Kuru. Entirely at his ease, Duryodhana says to Yudhishtira, "The rest of you sit around us and watch the gada-yuddha. May those that love us enjoy our duel!"

The Pandavas, Krishna, Balarama and the others sit in a wide circle around the antagonists. Balarama is full of grace after his pilgrimage. His face is radiant; so is his body: fair as wave-froth, draped in shimmering blue silk. Krishna sits at his side, dark and mysterious as a blue lotus. Together, they are like the full moon and a cloud beside it.

Bheema and Duryodhana bow solemnly to each other and the battle begins with a clap of maces ringing together, showering the two kshatriyas in sparks. The earth under their feet shudders with each stroke and birds fly out of the trees, crying in alarm. But what Duryodhana said when he lay submerged in the lake is true and the combatants are soon overcome by tiredness. They stagger on their feet and can hardly swing their weapons.

Yudhishtira calls a halt to the duel. "You are both exhausted. Rest a while and then resume."

Panting, Bheema and Duryodhana sink down on the ground, gratefully. When they have rested an hour, they rise and fight again. Like two bull-elephants in a jungle's heart, Duryodhana and Bheema battle and the night is lit by the moon risen above them and the streams of sparks that flow from their maces when they ring against each other are endless firefly swarms! The Pandavas light some torches, as well, for them to fight by. They fight honorably, with dharma and Balarama, their master, watches them with some pride.

Once or twice, Duryodhana, his skills dazzling, strikes Bheema's mace out of his hands. He never strikes the Pandava when he is unarmed, but waits for him to retrieve his weapon before attacking him again. Bheema's roars shake Samantapanchaka. Now he strikes his cousin's mace from his hands and Duryodhana's eyes blaze in the night. In a wink, he picks up his weapon and, even as he rises with it, he fells Bheema with a flashing blow. Bheema is up at once and they fight again.

Into the small hours they duel; until Yudhishtira stops them once more, saying they should rest and begin again with the new day. They sleep for a few hours. When Bheema and Duryodhana awake, it is with fire in their eyes. With dawn, they battle once more, more powerfully than ever. Their grunts and growls, their roars reverberate through the sacred glade. Their maces flash in the sun: Bheema's, which the Asura Mayaa gave him and Duryodhana's, as splendid.

Bheema's blows felled elephants during the war. But Duryodhana is a dancer, easily evading his stronger, but less agile adversary's extravagant strokes. The Kaurava fights with uncanny speed and he is hardly less powerful than Bheema. Twice he knocks the Pandava down and once Bheema faints with the strength of the blow that finds him. Once, one of Bheema's strokes lands squarely and Duryodhana staggers back and falls, like a sala tree in bloom uprooted by a tempest. Bheema waits for him to get up; and when he does, knocks him down again.

But when Duryodhana rises again, he begins to fight as he hasn't done yet: as if he has been saving his strength. Now Bheema can't match the Kaurava at all. Duryodhana seems to be in more places than one, at the same moment. His strokes land like gashes of lightning from every direction, easily passing Bheema's defenses and crashing into his body. Twice, Bheema had fought Shalya. Both times they had been almost equal, perhaps Bheema slightly the superior for youth being with him. Duryodhana is an opponent of a different ilk; most of all, his speed is unearthly. Bheema staggers about, he roars in rage and pain. But he is increasingly helpless against his cold, quicksilver adversary; it will not be long before Duryodhana kills his cousin.

Arjuna asks Krishna, "Which of them is better, who deserves to win?"

Krishna smiles, "Both are great mace-fighters and they have the same guru. But surely, you can see Bheema is no match for Duryodhana. Your brother is stronger than your cousin; but in speed and skill Duryodhana has left him far behind. Thirteen years behind, Arjuna. It hardly matters how powerful Bheema's blows are if Duryodhana dodges them as easily as he does." Krishna sees fear in Arjuna's eyes and sighs. "Yudhishtira has been foolish to allow the war to be decided by this battle. The beaten enemy, who comes back to battle, is the most dangerous one. If they fight fairly, Duryodhana will certainly win and Bheema will die."

Just then, Duryodhana lands a stunning, exquisite blow. Krishna breathes, "Look at that! If there was not a kingdom at stake, I could spend days watching

these two. Alas there is and Bheema must kill him if all the war is not to be in vain. I only wonder how he will do it.”

Krishna grows thoughtful. Duryodhana's blows have begun to land frequently on Bheema, who totters like a wounded elephant, swaying on his feet, roaring again and again. Arjuna turns to Krishna in panic, “How can Bheema kill Duryodhana? You must help him.”

Again that impenetrable smile appears on the Dark One's lips. He seems to be waiting for the right moment. Duryodhana lands two dreadful blows, felling Bheema again. Bheema shakes his head; he growls and begins to rise, when suddenly Krishna whispers to Arjuna, “If only Bheema would remember the oath he swore in Hastinapura.”

Arjuna looks perplexed. Krishna murmurs, “That he would break Bheema's thigh.”

Bheema is rising groggily from the ground. He looks at Arjuna and Krishna in despair. For the first time in his life, the kshatriya who killed Baka and Hidimba finds his confidence shaken. He knows he will not last much longer against his cousin. Then he sees Arjuna slap his own thighs with his palms, meaningfully. On the brink of everything as Bheema is, he understands immediately.

Meanwhile, Yudhishtira is losing hope with each moment that passes. With every blow, Duryodhana seems more certain to kill Bheema. Yudhishtira's face is a picture of misery. Sahadeva, Nakula, Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna scarcely breathe. Covered in blood, Bheema can hardly move any more. He stands in one place, turning round and round, tiredly, his mace raised just in defense, ineffectually. Duryodhana circles him like a panther, toying with him, looking for a chance to finish him. The frantic Yudhishtira calls another break. The mace-fighters sink down to rest. Bheema's eyes are glazed, while Duryodhana's burn darkly. The Kaurava knows he will win this duel. At last, he will achieve his life's fondest ambition: to kill his cousin!

Not to lose his advantage, Duryodhana is the first to rise. He calls tauntingly to Bheema to get up. Bheema does, with an effort and they begin again. In a moment, Duryodhana fetches Bheema a stroke that knocks him down on his back. Bheema shakes the fog that rises into his eyes and gets up again, heroically. With a roar, he aims a huge blow at Duryodhana's chest. He is so tired Duryodhana allows him to begin his stroke, before he leaps nimbly into the air and above the arc of Bheema's mace! Bheema stumbles forward with the impetus of his own swing. Landing supplely, Duryodhana catches his cousin

with a smart half-blow across his back that sends him sprawling into the dust again. Now Bheema takes still longer to rise; when he does, he is unsteady on his feet.

Duryodhana closes for the kill. Bheema is good for perhaps one blow more; at most a couple and then he would die. Duryodhana prods Bheema with his mace-head, laughing in his face, goading him into some final rashness. The tired Pandava seems to take the bait. He lunges forward and aims another massive blow at Duryodhana's chest. Once more, Duryodhana waits for him to begin his wild swing, then leaps high into the air to evade it. Bheema stops his stroke halfway. A startled look flashes into Duryodhana's eyes. As the Kaurava comes down from the top of his spring, Bheema hurls his mace with a half-swing and every bit of his remaining strength. It crashes squarely into his cousin's thighs, breaking them and smashing his manhood.

Duryodhana's scream echoes under the hushed trees. Still screaming, he falls and lies wriggling like a serpent with a broken back. Like Surya's sarathy, the legless Aruna, magnificent Duryodhana lies on holy ground and the sky erupts in a battery of thunder, peal after peal, which threatens to shake the earth loose from her orbit. Meteors streak down in their hundreds, while the cries of birds and beasts, yakshas, rakshasas and pisacahas echo all around¹. Bheema has felled Duryodhana with a most treacherous blow: in a gada-yuddha, it is forbidden to strike one's opponent below his navel. It is a crime, a sin, adharma.

Just now, Bheema doesn't care a whit for dharma. His tiredness vanished as if by magic, he leaps into the air, his eyes alight, roaring in joy. With his great body splattered with his own blood and Duryodhana's, he seems hardly human as he runs up to the fallen Kaurava, kicks away his golden crown and plants a foot on his head. "Thirteen years ago you laughed at the oath I swore. I have kept my oath, Duryodhana! Do you remember how your brothers called me a cow? I have never forgotten that. I swore then that your head would lie under my foot some day and here it is. Feel my foot, cousin!"

He grinds Duryodhana's head down, while the Kaurava whimpers for the agony in his shattered parts. Bheema raises his foot up and stamps Duryodhana's face. He raises his foot again, but Yudhishtira rushes at him and drags him away, bloody-eyed still.

"Enough Bheema! You have kept your oath and that is enough. With that, all enmity ends. Duryodhana is your brother; he is a Kuru. He is a king, a lord of eleven aksauhinis. You demean yourself by setting your foot on his head. I will not allow you to humiliate a fallen king."

Tears in his eyes, he goes and kneels beside Duryodhana. Gently he says, “Duryodhana, you will soon be in a place where there are now more of those we love than remain in this world. I envy you! The world you leave me to rule is so empty. The kali yuga is upon us and the earth has lost her glory. Go in peace, my brother. I salute you, O king of the earth!”

Though his chest heaves in mortal agony and sobs are torn helplessly from him, a light in Duryodhana’s eyes and the ghost of a smile on his lips show that he is grateful to the compassionate Yudh-ishtira.

EIGHT

THE CLARITY OF KRISHNA

But not everyone at Samantapanchaka celebrates Duryodhana's fall. Balarama jumps up in a rage. His lips throbbing, his great body shaking, he roars, "Bheema, you coward! You have disgraced us all. You struck him below the waist. I will avenge Duryodhana, I will kill you myself!"

He seizes up his Halayudha, uncanny plough-weapon of a hundred fires and blades and rushes at Bheema who stands nonplussed. In a flash, Krishna seizes Balarama and restrains him powerfully. Only he can; and how beautiful they both look at that moment, one dark and his brother fair.

Krishna cries, "Stop! There is no crime in what Bheema did. It was for the bigger cause that he struck Duryodhana down. How does this one thing Bheema did move you to such anger that you want to kill him? You found no fault in everything Duryodhana made the Pandavas suffer. I did not see you rush to kill the Kaurava, when Draupadi was dragged into the Kuru sabha. This man bared his thigh and called the Pandavas' wife to sit in his lap. His thigh should have been smashed that same day; but when Bheema sprang at Duryodhana, Yudhishtira stopped him. Which kshatriya can bear such an insult to his wife? That day, Bheema swore he would break Duryodhana's thigh and today he has kept his oath. A warrior must keep his word at any cost. That is what Bheema has done."

Balarama struggles against Krishna, but he cannot get free. "Balarama, you can't bear this one injustice against Duryodhana, if it is even that. But you will forget all the sins of this evil one, all the provocation he has given the sons of Pandu, why, the very earth. You choose to take Bheema's slight fault by itself, as if it were a worse crime than all Duryodhana's crimes! Since this is how you feel, listen to what I have to say." Krishna's voice takes on an edge. "Even on the day Panchali was humiliated I could have killed Duryodhana and his brothers and set Yudhishtira on the Kuru throne. But I did not interfere. Why, until the last moment, I did my best to avert the war. When I could not, I did not bear any arms but only drove Arjuna's horses.

You swore you would take no part in the war. You must keep your word. If you did not fight against evil, at least you must not fight for it. Let this sinner lie where he has fallen; it is not for you to avenge him. Your love for Duryodhana prevents you from seeing with clear eyes. The Pandavas are our cousins. They

have suffered a great deal and they have every right to some happiness. You must not harm them.”

The threat to Bheema’s life is very real. Now, Balarama seems to calm down a little. He does not struggle to free himself from Krishna any more. But he still stands glowering at Bheema and Krishna continues, “The kali yuga has come to the world. Nowhere on earth shall pure dharma be found any more, but only mixed with adharma. The first nine days of the war were fought nobly. From the tenth day, the shadow of the kali fell over the battle. Day by day, the shadow grew and monstrous sins were committed on Kurukshetra. The fault is only time’s. Evil and violence are the signs of the kali. Destiny fulfils herself darkly in the fourth yuga and this is only its beginning.” Krishna’s eyes are shining, “I, for one, am convinced that the end justifies the means.”

But Balarama is not; he says, “Keep your sophistry, Krishna: nothing will persuade me that what Bheema did today was dharma. Duryodhana was as much a mace-fighter as I am and he has been killed treacherously. Let the world always speak of Bheema as a cheat and of Duryodhana as a ksha-triya. I am proud of my sishya Duryodhana and ashamed of Bheema. I say that Duryodhana has fulfilled the yagna of war that he undertook nobly. He will find Devaloka for himself and live there forever!”

Krishna smiles to hear his brother, but he is relieved that he has thought better of killing Bheema. When he is certain Balarama will not attack the Pandava, he releases him. Balarama goes up to Duryodhana and kneels beside him with a sob. He takes his pupil’s hand tenderly and bids him farewell. He cannot bear to watch his torment and mounts his chariot and rides away from Samantapanchaka, without even looking at the Pandavas. Yudhishtira has tears in his eyes and Bheema seems dazed.

Krishna heaves a sigh and says cheerfully, “He has been away from Dwaraka for a long time. He will forget his anger when Revati gives him his first bowl of wine.”

But Bheema stands crestfallen. After Balarama’s tirade, even Arjuna, who reminded him of his oath during the duel, stands away from his brother. Krishna goes up and embraces Bheema fervently. He cries, “I am proud of you! Only the rare man fulfils even some of his oaths. You, Bheemasena, have kept all yours. I am so proud of you!”

Then, from a way off, Yudhishtira smiles at Bheema. With a cry, Bheema rushes to his brother and prostrates himself at his feet. “Bless me, my lord! All your enemies are dead. The long story of hatred has ended and I lay the world at

your feet. Panchali will not sleep on the floor any more. Bless me, my brother!”

Yudhishtira raises him up and embraces him. All the Pandavas and all those with them break into loud cries, of 'Jaya'! Now everyone rushes to Bheema to hug him. Conches are blown, drums beaten; the name of Vayu's son resounds in that place.

With an inscrutable look in his eye, Krishna turns to Duryodhana. He says slowly, “We need not bother to kill this man, he is as good as dead. He was the worst sinner and retribution has found him. He had many wise men to tell him what the way of dharma was. Time and again, he spurned their wisdom.

How much poor Vidura begged him to mend his ways. Duryodhana would only listen to that serpent Shakuni. The time to pay has come and he must pay alone. Look where he lies now, broken on the ground, yes, even he who was the greatest king, the most powerful man on earth. Let us leave him here to pay in full. He is just a dry log of wood now, not worth bothering with.”

Duryodhana lies gasping in unbearable pain. But at what Krishna says he rears up on his palms like a cobra and hisses, “Stop, you son of a sudra! You are not even a kshatriya or a king, that you dare speak to me like this. Wretched cowherd, you have been the death of me. You remembered Bheema's vow. He fought fairly, until you whispered in Arjuna's ear and he slapped his thighs.”

There is untold hatred in his voice, “Black cowherd, son of Kamsa's slave, you caused this war by poisoning my cousins' hearts. And you dare call me a sinner? Who brought Shikhandi before Bheeshma and made him lay down his bow? Who told Yudhishtira to lie to Drona that Aswatthama was dead? And the Acharya put down his weapon. You think I did not watch you, cowherd? I saw everything you did. Who turned day into night and the unsuspecting Jayadratha was murdered? Who sacrificed the monster Ghatotkacha, so your precious Arjuna would not have to face Karna's Shakti? And who told Arjuna to shoot Karna down when he knelt to lift his chariot-wheel? You did, evil one, always you. It is your cunning and not their valor that won this war for the sons of Pandu. Without your plotting, Bheeshma, Drona and Karna could never have been killed. You may deceive the world, Krishna, but I know you. Of us all, you are the worst sinner!”

Krishna laughs in his face. “So now you would blame it all on me! But the truth, Duryodhana, is that your greed cost these millions their lives. The truth is that all your brothers and friends died because of you. Bheeshma, Drona, Karna and all the rest died because they fought for you and for evil. Bheeshma should never have agreed to fight. Drona could have left Hastinapura and gone away.

Karna knew you were in the wrong; he knew you would lose this war. But he loved you too much to abandon you.”

His eyes are hard as diamonds and Krishna continues, “You blame this war on me, Duryodhana? Have you perhaps forgotten how I came to Hastinapura before the war began? Have you forgotten how I begged you to make peace? Then you would not listen. Your greed held you firm. You would not part with five towns, why, you said you wouldn’t give the Pandavas enough land to set on a needle’s point. What you taste now is the fruit of the bitter tree of envy, which your father and your uncle Shakuni planted in your heart when you were a boy. The tree has matured, its fruit are ripe.

You speak so glibly of treachery. What about Abhimanyu, whom you cut down in the flower of his youth? Just for that crime you should die, again and again. Yudhishtira wastes his sympathy on you. I feel no pity for you; you have got what you deserve.”

Despite his agony, a familiar sneer curls Duryodhana’s lip and a thin brow is still arched in disdain. Though his breath comes torturedly from him, he wheezes defiantly, “I have lived a full life. I have studied the Vedas. I have always been generous to anyone who came to me in need. I have been king of all this earth and tasted her fruits to the full. I have trodden on my enemies’ heads. I am a fortunate man, cowherd. I have lived a joyful life and I look forward to a joyful after-life. Dying in this most sacred place, I will find the heaven where kshatriyas go who die in battle and there my brothers and my Karna are waiting for me. As for the rest of you, you have years still to spend in this world of sorrow, this earth that is just a shadow of what it was.”

His eyes are undimmed, glittering and fierce as ever. He pauses, his breath becomes more labored with every moment. Painfully, he resumes, “As for Bheema stamping my head, I am past caring for that. In a short while, crows and vultures will feed on this head and by what he did, his place shall be with the scavengers.” With a final effort, he manages to say again, “I have died like a kshatriya. I will find swarga for myself!”

He sinks back on the ground and lies writhing and gasping in savage pain. Then, out of the sky falls a shower of petals, like crystal fireflies on the dying Duryodhana! They fill Samantapanchaka with the fragrance of Devaloka, for the Gods themselves bless the Kaurava for his indomitable courage. Duryodhana’s body may be broken, but not his spirit. The sky has grown lambent to honor the fallen kshatriya and the Pandavas hang their heads to see that heaven seems to take their cousin’s side.

Krishna turns on them in rage. “Of course Bheeshma and Drona and Karna were killed with deceit! Did you imagine for a moment that they could have been killed otherwise? They were the very acme of the warrior’s prowess. You could never have beaten them fairly, let alone killed them. They lived upon the earth like Gods; not all your devastras, not Arjuna’s archery or Bheema’s strength could have brought those men down. Why, this serpent Duryodhana could never be killed in a fair battle.

Listen to me now and hear me well. Years ago in the Kamyaka vana, I wiped the tears from Draupadi’s eyes and I swore to her I would bring death to those that had tormented her. Yudhishtira, you did not seem to mind that your wife had been humiliated in the sabha of Hastinapura. You only spoke of the dharma or the adharma of what happened. You allowed these beasts to drag her into that court, to revile her, to try to strip her naked. And you would not let Bheema kill them, as they deserved, because you said it was not dharma.

It seems that to you there were other things more important than Panchali’s tears. But to me, Yudhishtira, there was nothing in the world more momentous than her tears. I swore I would kill those that had made her cry. Bheeshma and Drona never raised a hand, never spoke a word to help her; for that, they have died. I believe in only one thing: the tears of the oppressed must be wiped and justice given to them. Draupadi could hardly help herself against the men who abused her and not even her husbands were sure that they would redress what she had endured. But not I. I said I would kill the devils that made her cry and I have kept my word. I have no doubts, no regrets. I see clearly where dharma lay in this war and where adharma.

As for the sin of the deceit we used to kill our enemies, let it fall on my head! I care nothing for it. I will bear those crimes gladly for the sons of Pandu, because they are my very life to me. If we had not used some judicious deceit, this war would have been lost. You would all have died. Duryodhana would still sit upon the throne in Hastinapura and the earth would be plunged in a rule of hell. For me, nothing could be worse than that.”

At what he says, the Pandavas feel as if a burden has been taken from them. They breathe more easily and guilt lifts away quite magically from their hearts. Krishna says, “The sun has sunk to the western mountain and night is upon us. Come, let us go back.”

They turn and walk away from Sampantapanchaka. Duryodhana, lord of the earth, lies alone in the gathering dusk. His blood and seed have spilt together on to holy ground and pain sears through his every limb. He lies dying, with not a

living soul at his side.

BOOK TEN

SAUPTIKA PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

IN HASTINAPURA

The war is over: eighteen days that have been like eighteen years, longer. The Pandavas ride back to Kurukshetra. Custom demands they should enter the vanquished enemy's camp; and they do now, blasting on their conches. The Panchajanya and the Devadatta resound above the rest. Krishna is the most cheerful one in the company. More than anything, he does not want the sons of Pandu dejected at what happened in Samantapanchaka. He does not want their moment of victory dimmed by remorse.

They find the Kaurava camp, which had once teemed with eleven aksauhinis, deserted. Nothing stirs save a twilight breeze, which murmurs endlessly about all the killing and dying on yawning Kurukshetra. The last shafts of the sun light that desolation with scarlet and gold. As soon as they arrive, Krishna turns to Arjuna and says, "Climb down from the chariot, bring the Gandiva and your quivers with you."

Arjuna is puzzled, but does as Krishna asks. Krishna puts down his whip and reins and he, too, alights from the white ratha that Agni once gave Arjuna in the Khandava vana. The Pandavas stand watching curiously. The moment Krishna climbs down there is a flash of light above the chariot, on the flag with Hanuman's form. They see the immortal vanara fly out and vanish into the sky! The banner is empty of its emblem. That is not all: the white chariot bursts into flames; it burns like tinder. The gandharva horses are ablaze and in a few moments, all that remains of chariot and steeds is a mound of ashes.

Arjuna cries to Krishna, "My Lord! What is this? Krishna, I don't understand."

Krishna's face is stern, as he says, "Their purpose in the world is served. Arjuna, your chariot was struck by the brahmastras of Drona and Karna, by Aswatthama's agneyastra. The truth is that both chariot and horses were consumed long ago; but as long as I sat at your chariot-head and drove your horses, they did not perish. Now we have no further use for them and they are ashes. All things in this world exist for a purpose; when their purpose is served, they cease to be."

Krishna's face softens. More gently now, he says, "And so it is with men, Arjuna. Each man is sent out on this mysterious journey called life and he comes

into the world to achieve a purpose. Once his mission is over, the earth has no more need of him. It is so with all of us: even me. I have come into the world for a mission and as soon my mission is complete, I will leave.” He sees the look of alarm on Arjuna’s face. “My tasks are not yet over and neither are yours or your brothers’. We have much to do still. But don’t grieve for your chariot and horses: they accomplished what they were created for and now they have gone.”

Krishna turns to Yudhishtira. He takes his hand and says, “You have won the war and I am proud of you. It is the custom for the victors to spend the night outside their defeated enemies’ camp. Let us spend the night somewhere in these woods.”

Yudhishtira is deeply moved by the miracle of the chariot. He says fervently to Krishna, “My Lord, we have won the war only because of you. Now I understand what Vyasa Muni once said to me, ‘Where there is dharma, Krishna is. And where Krishna is, there is victory.’“

Krishna says, “You and your brothers fought heroically. You deserve to have victory.”

They ride a short way and decide to stay beside the river flowing nearby. They have just settled under some trees, when Krishna sees a shadow on Yudhishtira’s face. He asks, “Why are you distraught?”

Yudhishtira has turned pale. He says slowly, “By your grace we have won the war and the earth is ours now. But, Krishna, I fear the wrath of Gandhari. She is a bhakta and a righteous queen and she is a mother who has lost all her sons. She could burn the world with her grief and she may curse us, when she hears how Duryodhana died. I beg you, go to Hastinapura and pacify Gandhari.”

Krishna is thoughtful. He says softly, “You are right. Gandhari must not curse you: there are others to bear her wrath. I will go at once.”

Krishna has his own chariot fetched and sets out for the Kuru capital.

Meanwhile, hiding among the trees in Samantapanchaka, Sanjaya saw Duryodhana fall. Shocked and weeping, he flew back to Hastinapura. His arms raised above his head, he came wailing into the palace and Dhritarashtra’s presence. Dhritarashtra sat with Gandhari and his daughters-in-law around him. Vidura was there, as well.

Sanjaya ran in and cried, “My lord! Fate has robbed us of everything we had.” Then he could not go on, but sobbed like a child. Water was fetched for him and when he drank, he grew calmer. He managed to say, “The war is over and we have lost. Shalya and Shakuni were killed, Uluka is dead and...” he

broke down again.

Vidura asked, “What of Duryodhana?”

Sanjaya cried as if he had lost his own son, “Bheema felled Duryodhana in a gada-yuddha! He lies dying at Samantapanchaka.”

Gandhari slumped to the floor from her throne. Dhritarashtra swayed where he sat and he swooned. The world spun before Vidura’s eyes and he clutched the arms of his chair. Duryodhana’s queens and his brothers’ wives set up a lament, many of them fell unconscious. The blind king revived in a short while and then fainted again; and thus, twice or thrice. The palace maids came to Gandhari. They sprinkled water on her face and held sharp salts under her nose. She lay as if she was dead.

After a while, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra revived and poor Vidura did his best to comfort them. Vyasa arrived, opportunely; even he could hardly quieten the surging tide of grief. Gandhari wailed hysterically, beating her breast and Dhritarashtra sobbed and sobbed.

It is now that Krishna appears in the Kuru palace and is shown into the sabha.

Tears well in his eyes when he sees Dhritarashtra and Gandhari in their sorrow. He comes forward to take their hands. The presence of the Avatara infuses their hearts with mysterious strength. Full of mercy, Krishna sits near that king and queen, speaking tenderly to them, stroking their hands, their faces, as if he was comforting two children. Gradually, their sobbing subsides; sorrow’s storm blows more quietly in their aged bodies. In their moment of crisis, they clearly feel the love of the Dark One, transcending their grief, transcending everything: a timeless, unshakeable love. Like children with a father, they let him console them with his gentle words, his healing touch.

When they are calmer, Krishna says to Gandhari, “Do you remember the day I last came to Hastinapura? I came on a mission of peace and Duryodhana plotted to take me his hostage. I have not forgotten how you stopped him then, Gandhari. Do you remember what you said to your son? You said, ‘Where there is dharma, there is victory.’ So it has turned out, O queen.

Today, also, I have come on a mission of peace. I have come to beg you not to blame the Pandavas for what has happened. Yudhishtira grieves that he has caused you such sorrow. You know how much the sons of Pandu wanted to prevent this war. They implored you to give them just five towns and they would be content. But Duryodhana was adamant. I want you to recall clearly that it was

not the Pandavas, but your son who was responsible for the war and all the tragedy it brought. You must not be tempted to blame Pandu's sons for Duryodhana's sins. They have suffered enough for a lifetime; you must welcome them home with love. Most of all, Gandhari, you must not turn your wrath on them. It will not be dharma if you curse them for a war they never wanted."

He pauses to let what he says sink in, then, continues, "You don't need me to tell you in what esteem Yudhishtira holds you both. Now, there is no Kuru prince left, save a son of Pandu, to sit upon the ancient throne of Hastinapura. I beg you again, Gandhari, do not hate Kunti's sons. You are so pure that you can consume the very earth with your anger. All will truly be lost if you turn your fury on the Pandavas."

Gandhari's shoulders shake and she says in confession, "I am glad you came, Krishna. No one but you could have calmed me: for my reason had left me and I would have done some harm to Kunti's sons. Truly, you know how to speak to the heart. Grief's rage has left me and I see clearly again. I will be just to the Pandavas. I will not harm them."

Krishna takes her hands. Gandhari breaks down again and sobs piteously. The grief she has held behind the floodgates of anger flows from her and the Avatara's compassion washes over the queen.

Gandhari composes herself and says, "With my sons all dead, I have only you to comfort me. Don't abandon me, Krishna."

The Dark One sits with them for a while longer, consoling them with his presence of grace. Suddenly, a premonition of evil seizes him. He divines a sinister plot that has taken root in the mind of a brahmana warrior. Krishna rises and says quickly, "The Pandavas are in danger. Give me your leave, I must go at once!"

Dhritarashtra whispers, "Hurry! You must protect my nephews at any cost, they are all this kingdom has left."

Krishna flies back to Yudhishtira and his brothers in the Jaitra, his chariot of the air. He is relieved to find them safe beside the river, under the trees where he left them. They have Satyaki with them, but all the others have returned to the Pandava camp. Krishna tells them how Dhritarashtra and Gandhari were pacified; they were waiting for their nephews to return to Hastinapura. He also tells them of the danger he had sensed from Aswatthama.

"You are in mortal peril. We must be on our guard tonight."

TWO

THE WHITE OWL'S LESSON

Sanjaya cannot help himself: he has to go back to Samantapanchaka where Duryodhana lies dying. It is twilight when he arrives and, peering carefully through the trees, he sees the Kaurava is alone. He lies writhing on the ground and sharp hisses of breath escape him, when the pain is unendurable. Duryodhana rolls from side to side, he is covered in mud. Tears course trails down his ashen face and he sobs pitifully with torment.

Sanjaya thinks his heart will break, seeing him like that: Duryodhana who had been lord of all he surveyed, master of the earth. No one had been as powerful or as wealthy as the man who now lies in the dirt, his very manhood crushed and no one beside him, as he dies slowly in the wilderness. Here lies a king whose feet had never felt the paving of a street; one whose palace had been like a God's temple. Sanjaya thinks of how, once, Duryodhana would pass through his city: the glittering retinue that went with him and he riding his caparisoned elephant like Indra himself on Airavata. Where is all that majesty now? How pitiless fate is, that she lays the sovereigns of the earth so low. Everything lost, the Kaurava lies wriggling in the dust.

Duryodhana presses his palms hard against the earth, as agony rips through him. He grits his teeth, his chest heaves and now and again a helpless cry is torn from his lips when the pain crests. At times, his body twitches in spasms, at others he shivers uncontrollably. During brief remissions, he shakes his head and growls at his helplessness. Sanjaya runs forward and kneels beside his dying prince.

Duryodhana sees Sanjaya and at once, he grows calm. He lies back with a sigh and Sanjaya takes his hand. Slowly, with an intense effort, Duryodhana speaks to him, "Sanjaya, what a loving soul you are that you have come back to me. My friend, I am in hell, but my life refuses to leave this broken body."

Sanjaya's tears fall onto his hands. Duryodhana smiles wanly and says, "Don't cry for me, Sanjaya. I am very near swarga now. But it seems I have to pay for my sins and be purified before I reach the blessed place."

A livid spasm tears through him again and he gasps. In a while, it seems to pass and he says weakly, "I can hardly bear it. Look at me, Sanjaya. This is I, Duryodhana, who just a few days ago had Bheeshma, Drona, Karna, Kripa,

Shalya, Kritavarman, Dusasana and a thousand kshatriyas to fight for me. I was the lord of eleven aksauhinis and I was so certain I would win the war. Look at me now.”

Duryodhana weeps. Speaking exhausts him and he falls silent for a while. Then he says, “Sanjaya, will you do something for me?”

“Anything, my lord!” sobs Sanjaya.

“Find Acharya Kripa, Kritavarman and Aswatthama. Tell them that Bheema struck me down with a low blow. Tell them I am still alive and I want to see them before I die. Then go to Hastinapura and tell Dhritarashtra and Gandhari what happened. Tell my mother that her son died like a kshatriya. Say I did not run from battle, but fought to the last, my head held high. Tell her I was happy as I died and I would find Devaloka for myself. Tell her, good Sanjaya, I died without any regret.”

Again he subsides, gasping. His hand goes limp in Sanjaya’s and he whispers, “Go now, my friend, send my three warriors to me quickly.”

Then, in sweet relief from his ordeal, he has fainted. Sanjaya runs through the forest, calling to the three warriors as loudly as he dares. They are not far and seeking Duryodhana themselves, since they do not know where he went from the Dwaipayana lake. Sanjaya tells them everything that happened and shows them the way to Samantapanchaka. He says, choking, “I have a message from Duryodhana to take to Hastinapura. And I cannot bear to see him as he is.”

Sanjaya turns back to the city. Word of Duryodhana’s fall has spread like fire in Hastinapura and some of the people come out into the wilds to see him. But they find him unconscious and growing afraid of the jungle as night draws near, they turn back home. One tale tells how they bring Duryodhana’s youngest son to see his dying father. The Kaurava cannot even take the child on to his lap, where he once called Panchali to sit and waves him away in misery. Though his pain is intolerable, Duryodhana refuses to be carried back to Hastinapura.

Kripa, Kritavarman and Aswatthama find their king alone, lying there like the sun fallen onto the earth, the disc of the full moon shrouded in a fog, or a great tiger struck down by hunters, still raging.

He is conscious, his brow furrowed, squirming on the ground, crying out at times. Aswatthama kneels beside him and takes his hands. When he sees the bloody ruin below Duryodhana waist, dizziness overcomes Drona’s son.

When the others revive him, Aswatthama clutches Duryodhana’s hands and cries, “What has this world come to that a king like you, O lord of the earth, lies

alone in your final hour? It is a vile world and nothing in it is permanent.”

Duryodhana manages a wry smile and, his voice lower than a whisper, says, “All things in this world only die, Aswatthama and this is the end written for me in fate’s book. But don’t grieve for me, my friends, I am not sorry my life ends here. Remember that as soon as breath leaves this body, I will be in Devaloka. And in heaven, my brothers and my Karna are waiting for me. I see everything clearly now. All this is fate and there is no use blaming anyone for it.”

His chest heaves again, in mortal exhaustion. Duryodhana wipes his tears and brushes aside the dust-matted hair that has fallen over his face.

Aswatthama blazes up in anger. “The sons of Pandu are the worst sinners! They cover themselves in a cloak of dharma, but look what they have done to you. They killed my father dishonorably and they have done the same to you. Duryodhana, just say the word and this very night I will kill the Pandavas. I will kill them under Krishna’s eyes! They are a plague upon the earth, they must not be left alive.”

Duryodhana’s eyes fill. He had always thought that Aswatthama was partial to the Pandavas and now here he is swearing to kill them for his sake. The Kaurava summons the last of his strength and says to Kripa, “Acharya, bring me water from the river.”

When Kripa complies, Duryodhana says, “Sprinkle Aswatthama with the water, make him the new Senapati of my army.”

Sadly, solemnly, Kripa performs the ritual; he intones the mantras to make Aswatthama supreme commander of the Kuru army. Aswatthama rises: his face dripping, his eyes shining as if he has been given command of a million men. He kneels again beside Duryodhana. The dying Kaurava lays his hand on his warrior’s head. Aswatthama clasps him and whispers fiercely, “I will not fail you, my lord. Revenge shall be ours tonight!”

The other two embrace their king and then leave him there, alone once more. As night falls, they make their way south, tiredly toward the Pandava camp. This camp is built on the hem of some woods. Aswatthama and his army of two arrive in those woods. They find a clear, lotus-laden pool and quench their thirst from it. They move on toward the edge of the trees and hear sounds of celebration coming from the Pandava camp. Too tired even to think of attacking the enemy tonight, they retreat deeper into the woods and find a fine old tree, an immense nyagrodha with a thousand branches, under which to rest. They say their evening prayers and no sooner have their heads touched the

ground than Kripa and Kritavarman are asleep.

Aswatthama cannot sleep. He lies under the tree, his eyes wide in the deepening twilight. His mind works feverishly, plotting revenge. But no plausible scheme rises into it and he lies frustrated. The sun sinks below the asta mountains and night, mother of the universe, falls. Aswatthama's gaze ranges over the dense branches overhead and he sees them adorned by so many crows' nests: like large fruit among the leaves. The dark birds have all come to roost for the night and they are asleep. Aswatthama's eyelids are growing heavy, when he sees a flash of white wings in the darkness. It seems a shimmering spirit from another world has flown down into this one. Peering up intently, Aswatthama sees it is no spirit that has alighted in the branches above him. It is an immense owl and when he can see its head clearly, he sees it is a terrible bird. Its green eyes flash like cold lamps in the dark.

Aswatthama lies rapt. He has the strangest feeling that the scene unfolding above him is an omen. Once it has flown down into the tree, the white owl gives the most chilling screech and attacks the sleeping crows. The owl is a blizzard of beak and talons; it seems to be everywhere in that tree at once. The poor crows hardly have time to awake, before the marauding owl savages them. Raked and bloody, their black bodies fall dead out of the branches. The hunting owl brings such terror and the crows are taken so unawares, they perish in the onslaught hardly knowing what killed them.

When it has killed all the crows, the owl pauses to clean its beak and claws against the bark of the tree. Its huge eyes glow like moon-lenses in the night and the warrior below clearly sees the glint of satisfaction in them. Aswatthama wonders what the crows had done to the owl for it to wreak such revenge. The next moment, the great bird spreads its wings and truly like an unearthly spirit, it flies off and is lost in the night.

Suddenly, Aswatthama knows what he must do. In a frenzy, he wakes the others. Thinking they are being attacked they spring up, drawing their swords. It is only Aswatthama, trembling with excitement, burning in the night.

Kripa says sleepily, "What has possessed you now, Aswatthama? Go back to sleep, child."

His nephew cries, "I cannot sleep! I know how to have revenge on the Pandavas."

"What do you mean?"

Aswatthama's eyes gleam insanely. "We must kill them when they are

asleep! We must attack them now, when they don't expect us."

Kritavarman and Kripa gasp. Kripa cries, "How can you even think such a thing?"

"A sovereign of the earth, a master of eleven aksauhinis, lies dying by himself: his manhood shattered by cowardly Bheema. How else, uncle, do you suggest that we avenge him? The Pandavas have won this war with guile. Now we must also fight them with deceit. There is no other way."

Kripa says, "A warrior must be brave, but he must also be virtuous. You must remember Duryodhana was no king of dharma himself. He was greedy and ruthless. He humiliated the Pandavas. He cheated them out of everything they owned and banished them for thirteen years. Still, they sued for peace until the last moment. But Duryodhana was unrelenting. We must not take his death out of its context, or forget everything he did to the sons of Pandu. And as for the manner in which Bheema struck him down, it was only as he swore he would. Perhaps you are right that the gada-yuddha was not the occasion to do it. That isn't cause enough for us to commit the crime you want to."

But Aswatthama is adamant. "Was the way they killed my father, their guru, dharma? The time for dharma has passed. This is the time for revenge."

"And we will seek revenge, openly. We will challenge the Pandavas tomorrow and fight them to the death. That will be honorable and fate will smile on us. Yours is a dastardly plan, my son. I beg you, don't even think of such a sin."

Aswatthama is past listening to reason. "I have sworn to Duryodhana that I will kill the Pandavas. I am his Senapati now. This is the only way I can keep my word to him."

Kripa says, "I am tired and I cannot think clearly. Let us seek Dhritarashtra's counsel, queen Gandhari's and the wise Vidura's, before we do anything we might regret."

Aswatthama says, "I have made up my mind and I mean to do this thing tonight." A fearful smile touches his lips. "It is their first night of rest after the war. The Pandavas will be asleep. They would have taken off their armor and be lost in dreams. They will never wake up again."

Again, Kripa says, "You are so tired and sad that you don't realize what you are saying. Sleep now, Aswatthama; tomorrow we will fight the Pandavas together."

“Sleep! How can a man who is in the grip of anger or desire, anxiety or sorrow, sleep? I am churned by all four! I will sleep only after I have killed the sons of Pandu. If you won’t come with me, I will go alone. Farewell.”

He strides away toward his chariot. He has not gone ten paces when Kripa and Kritavarman cry after him, “Wait! We will come with you.”

They realize that it is later than they imagined. The kali yuga is upon them and the time for dharma is past. They are all that remain of Duryodhana’s army; from now, they will have to act together, whatever they did, or they would die. The last three warriors of Duryodhana’s numberless legions ride in the pitched night to avenge their fallen king.

THREE

THE SAVAGE CAMP

Riding through the darkness across Kurukshetra, the three warriors approach the Pandava camp. Aswatthama lets Kripa and Kritavarman down near the main gate. He says, “See no one escapes this way.”

He rides off into the night. He means to find another way in. As he goes, the dark wind in his face, suddenly a rakshasa looms in his path, its hundred strangely beautiful eyes glowing red, round its waist a tiger-skin dripping fresh blood and the skin of a black buck covering his radiant chest. A writhing serpent is his sacred thread and his many arms hold aloft diverse weapons. Flames issue from his fanged maw. Aswatthama looses a few arrows at the demon. The rakshasa yawns his mouth wide and swallows those shafts. Aswatthama summons the rathashakti. The apparition swallows that fiery missile as well. Leaping down from his chariot, Aswatthama draws his sword, golden-hafted and its blade the color of the sky; but it disappears from his hand and into the demonic being’s body like a mongoose into its hole! So does the great mace he seizes up next.

Aswatthama thinks this is no ordinary rakshasa; it makes no move to come any nearer, or to attack him. Drona’s son folds his hands and stands on one foot. He prays to Siva, by whose grace he was born. Abruptly, the rakshasa vanishes and in its place, a golden altar appears before the brahmana. In moments, all sorts of strange spirits materialize from that altar.

Some have three heads, some no head at all. Some are naked, pale phalluses erect; others wear tiger-skin. Some have three eyes and others just one. Some have four and five arms; some have tails. Some are minotaurian, others have bull’s heads and men’s limbs and still others are indescribable, for they have no human feature, or any bestial one. Many have the complexion of the lotus and they carry all kinds of weapons. Yet, these weird beings do not threaten Aswatthama in any way, only sing and dance bizarrely before him; they shriek and yodel, too. The Siva-bhakta knows these extraordinary creatures are his Lord’s ganas, come to announce their master.

The golden altar blazes up in flames. Bracing himself, Aswatthama climbs the steps that lead to the vedi. He cries, “Lord, I offer myself to you! I am born in the line of Angiras and I beg you to accept me as the sacrificial animal.” and is about to step into the flames, when a light illumines heaven and earth and Siva

stands before his devotee. The God wears deerskin; he is three-eyed, irradiant and carries his trisula. Matted jata covers his head, the crescent-moon peeps out from his topknot and the Ganga glimmers there. Aswatthama falls on his face to worship that vision.

Siva says, “Krishna is my finest bhakta and so far I protected the Panchalas for his sake. But the time of their lives has run out. Here, take this sword, Aswatthama and may your enemies perish.”

In a daze, Aswatthama takes the shining sword from awesome Sankara and the Lord vanishes. Just the ineffable fragrance of him lingers on the midnight air. Rising from where he knelt, Aswatthama stalks into the Pandava camp, the sword a long flame in his hand. To his right and left, unseen rak-shasas march. He peers into the first tent he comes to in the dark and dimly sees Dhrishtadyumna lying asleep on a white bed, on satin sheets, scented with powdered dhupa. Aswatthama steals into the tent.

For a moment, he stands staring at the sleeping Panchala prince. His lips curl, his eyes blaze and then, with a screech like the hunting owl’s, he lashes out with a kick at his father’s killer. Dhrish-tadyumna is startled awake and Drona’s son is at him. Dhrishtadyumna tries to get up, but Aswat-thama seizes his long hair, flings him down on the ground and begins to kick him relentlessly: in his stomach, his groin, his face, again and again. Dhrishtadyumna curls up in agony. In a flash, Aswatthama rips the string from the Panchala’s bow lying nearby. He plants his knees on Dhrish-tadyumna’s chest and quick as rage, winds the bowstring around his throat and throttles him. Dhrishtadyumna’s eyes bulge from his head, his tongue lolls out of his mouth. He grips his attacker’s hands and manages to gasp, “Don’t kill me like this! Kill me with an arrow like a kshatriya, or I won’t reach swarga.”

Aswatthama’s face is a mask, its eyes slit in hatred. Drona’s son, the Panchala’s boyhood friend, hisses, “You killed your own guru! swarga is not for men like you. I have come to send you to hell. You will be damned forever and that is what you deserve.”

Still throttling him with the bowstring, Aswatthama drags Dhrishtadyumna around the tent, kicking him, killing him in the most brutal way. Long after life has left the fire-prince’s body, Aswatthama continues to savage his corpse. At last he stands panting above the dead Dhrishtadyumna and his eyes gleam in satisfaction.

Aswatthama takes up Siva’s sword he had set down so he could kill that kshatriya with his bare hands. Now he goes through the rest of the Pandava

camp as the white owl did among the sleeping crows. Aswatthama slaughters the other Panchalas, Shikhandi and his brothers. He comes to another tent and sees Draupadi's sons asleep. They are hardly more than children. The brahmana enters stealthily and, covering their mouths so they did not cry out, he cuts their throats or plunges his sword into their hearts, killing them before they awake. He finds Yuddhamanyu and Uttamaejas and kills them¹.

Meanwhile, Kripa and Kritavarman have set fire to the camp from three sides and the tents blaze up like yagna flames in the dark. Roused by terrified screams in the feral night, the other sleeping soldiers wake up and try to run from the rakshasa attacking them at the midnight hour. Like Yamadutas, death's messengers, Kripa and Kritavarman cut them down at the only gate.

Aswatthama stalks that camp like Yama himself². His roars drown the screams of those he murders with Siva's sword, flashing like a moon-silver in his hand. Drona's son attacks the elephants and horses that stampede through the camp, felling them at will and is drenched in their innocent blood. Whinnying and trumpeting in terror, those beasts plunge away from the demented avenger; and on their panicstricken career, they trample a hundred Pandava soldiers who try to escape Drona's dreadful son.

Soon, the three Kaurava warriors meet again at the gate. Lit by the flames of the burning camp, their faces are wet with blood. Their mission is accomplished; their macabre sacrifice is complete: every man in the Pandava camp is dead and most of their beasts. Scavengers descend on the camp and begin to feast. Rakshasas and pisacahas arrive, to quaff the flowing blood. Gorging on flesh, fat and sucking marrow out of the corpses' bones, they dance in joy. Drunk with murder, Aswatthama, Kripa and Kritavarman embrace one another, roaring at the stars. They climb into the waiting chariot and ride back to Samantapanchaka like an evil, three-headed wind.

Duryodhana lies alone where he fell. He keeps his mace close beside him, because the night has flowered with a hundred baleful eyes. The jackal and hyenas packs have discovered him and every moment they pad closer. He roars and screeches at them and they retreat. But in a few moments, they come snuffling forward again, with low growls and the hyenas' mad cackling. The pain in Duryodhana's loins threatens to make him faint at any moment and he knows that will be the end: the scavengers will tear him apart.

Then, the animal eyes vanish as if by magic. It takes the Kaurava a few moments longer than it has the jackals and hyenas to hear horses flying toward him through the night, bearing Aswatthama and his army of two. Even before

they stop and alight, Duryodhana senses their excitement. Next moment, the three are at his side. He sees they are covered in blood and their eyes shine.

Smiling, Kripa says, "My lord, I see you mean to take your gada with you into Devaloka: a friend who remained faithful to the last!"

Aswatthama takes his king's hand fervidly and cries, "I did not fail you, Duryodhana! I killed all your enemies tonight. The Panchalas and Dhrishtadyumna are dead; Draupadi's sons are slain. What remained of the Pandavas' army is dead, their camp burned to the ground. But I did not find Yudhishtira and his brothers there and I did not find Satyaki or Krishna. Of the two forces that faced each other on Kurukshetra, my lord, from your army just Acharya Kripa, Kritavarman and I still live; and from the enemy's, only the five Pandavas, Krishna and Satyaki." He pauses a moment, then cries, "When you meet your guru, my father Drona, in heaven, tell him I have slain Dhritishadyumna, his sons and the sons of the Pandavas!"

By now, Duryodhana is gasping for his last breath. A faint smile touches his lips and there is a glitter of triumph in his hooded eyes. He manages to whisper to his final Senapati, "Aswatthama, you have done what Bheeshma, Drona and Karna could not! I am proud of you. May God bless you."

Duryodhana's eyes are full of death and his three warriors hold his hands tightly. Their king breathes, "I am going now, my friends, we will meet again in swarga."

Then he has gone and peace suffuses his dead face. At last, the tumult and anguish of that great and terrible life have ended. One by one, his warriors embrace their dead king and, their hearts full, they walk away from him. Once more, the night sprouts hungry eyes, as the scavenger packs arrive for their feast. But then, unearthly protection is upon Duryodhana's corpse. It begins to glow so eerily in the dark that the scavengers back away from it and run yelping into the night.

It is told that the moment life left Duryodhana's body, Sanjaya's eyes lost the miraculous sight with which they had been blessed so he could relate the events of the war of dharma to Dhritarashtra.

The most terrible morning of the Pandavas' lives dawns. They are roused by a man who comes howling to the tree under which they spent the night. It is Dhritishadyumna's sarathy, the only one to have escaped Aswatthama's carnage: by pretending to be dead. He cries to Yudhishtira, "They are all dead, my lord! Aswatthama killed them in the night. Your sons are slain, the Panchalas are

killed, my lords Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumna have been murdered!”

Yudhishtira falls where he stands and Satyaki catches him. For a moment, the other Pandavas stand turned to stone. It is the hour of atonement: for they, too, have killed thousands on Kurukshetra. Shock rages through their bodies, maddening them and then, mercifully, each one of them faints. Even Krishna seems shaken.

When Yudhishtira revives, in a low voice he says, “We have been vanquished in our victory.” He tells Nakula, “Go and fetch Draupadi.”

They ride to the camp and see the desolation Aswatthama has made of it: ashes everywhere and bloody corpses, their faces peaceless even in death, because they died so horribly. They see their sons lying side by side, some still on the charred remains of their beds, other having fallen off when Aswatthama killed them in their sleep. But the sight Yudhishtira can bear least is of Dhrishtadyumna, strangled, his swollen tongue protruding lewdly from his lips, his eyes staring in terror, his body and face covered in purple welts. This was how the splendid fire-prince had died at last, the kshatriya who had been their Senapati since the war began, without whom they could have never won the dharma yud-dha. Yudhishtira begins to sob. Satyaki and Bheema sit mutely beside their friend’s mangled corpse.

Arjuna walks around the horrific camp. When he sees the corpses of Uttamaugas and Yuddhamanyu, who rode at his chariot-wheels all these days, he breaks down. They hear the sound of a chariot driving up. Nakula has returned with Draupadi.

The Pandavas stand helpless, as Panchali is helped down from the chariot. She takes a few hesitant steps, then, sees her sons and collapses. When she regains her senses, hysteria has its way with her: her screams ring through the tragic morning. She beats her breast, tears her hair and cries out her sons’ names, her murdered brothers’ names. She screams at Yudhishtira, “Are you content now, that you have won the earth by sacrificing your sons?”

She falls across the body of each of her boys, kissing their faces, touching their wounds that smear her in dried blood, like sacramental kumkum and whimpering like a wild mother that has lost her young. Then, suddenly, she grows ominously quiet. Like a cobra uncoiling, she rises.

She says to Yudhishtira, “I will not eat again until Aswatthama is killed. I will die in this place.”

She sits down again and her husbands know she means to do exactly what

she has said. Yudhishtira tries to pacify her. “Your brothers and your sons died heroes and they have found swarga for themselves. How can you sit here in prayopavesha, Panchali? Aswatthama has escaped into the jungle, who can tell when we will find him?”

“I want revenge for my sons and my brothers, or I will die here.”

Yudhishtira cries, “Even if we do find Aswatthama and kill him, how will you believe we have?”

“He has a red jewel on his head, he was born with it. Bring me that stone and I will be content. Losing it will be worse than death for him.” Yet again, she turns to her husband she relies on whenever there is violence to be done, the one she can most easily persuade. She turns to Bheema and says, “Bheema, my love, you are the only one who will help me. You must do this for me!”

That is all it takes. Bheema swells up, his eyes turn red and he cries, “I will bring you the jewel. Nakula, come with me, be my sarathy.”

Bheema sets out to find Aswatthama. Yudhishtira sits near Draupadi. He puts his arms around her and does his best to comfort her. She sobs against his chest.

Krishna says, “Aswatthama has the brahmasirsa. He has left dharma behind him and he will stop at nothing any more. If he uses that astra, Bheema will not live. Drona once gave the brahmasirsa to Arjuna, but he did not trust Aswatthama with it: for it can make ashes of the earth in its four fires. But Aswatthama did not stop begging Drona and at last the father relented and gave his son the astra too.

I can never forget how Aswatthama flattered me once for a whole morning and I wondered where his flattery was leading. In a while, he asked me for the Sudarshana Chakra³! Bheema doesn’t know Aswatthama has the brahmasirsa. Arjuna, come with me, we must go after him.”

They climb into Krishna’s Jaitra and set out. When they are out of the others’ sight, Krishna says to his sarathy, “Daruka, fly!”

The wonderful horses take to the air and rise above the trees. With unerring instinct, they fly straight to where Bheema has already found Aswatthama, who is with Vyasa and some other rishis on the banks of the Ganga.

FOUR

ASWATTHAMA'S JEWEL

Meanwhile, Dhritarashtra is inconsolable. He is plunged in dark sorrow, crying without pause. Sanjaya says to him, “My lord, you mustn’t grieve like this. You know there is no one to console you any more.”

The blind king says, “I have nothing to live for any more.”

He slides down onto the floor and lies sobbing there. Vidura kneels beside his brother and tries to comfort him. “Your sons all died kshatriyas’ deaths, Dhritarashtra. You must not cry for those that have found heaven for themselves. Come, rouse yourself for the tasks that lie ahead.”

But Dhritarashtra has lost all his sons. Patiently, Vidura speaks to him, telling him about dharma, about life and death, that the soul never dies.

Hoping to provoke him out of his grief, Sanjaya says, “My lord, we told you long ago the course you chose would lead to doom. All that has happened is of your own making. A hundred kings have died for your son’s sake. You must come to Kurukshetra, to ensure their bodies are brought away and cremated. The last rites for them must be performed with honor.”

Finally, it is only when Vyasa arrives and adds his voice to the others’, that Dhritarashtra acquiesces, “Prepare my chariot, Sanjaya. Let Gandhari, Kunti and the other women of the palace ride with us.”

Soon, all the women gather on the palace steps. Their hair loose, crying, all of them clad in widows’ white and no gold or jewels adorning their bodies, these women whom not even the sun has seen now walk and ride through the streets of Hastinapura. Only Vidura remembers another day, thirteen years ago, when the Pandavas were exiled: Draupadi’s curse on the Kaurava wives has come to pass. The brahmanas of Hastinapura walk before the king’s chariot, chanting the Rudra hymns aloud, exactly as Dhaumya had done thirteen years ago. Vidura rides silently with the mourning procession.

Then, three wild-looking warriors in a chariot appear before the king and his train. It is Kripa, Aswatthama and Kritavarman, blood still on them from the night’s exploit. Kripa says, “My lord, your army is razed, we three are the only survivors.”

Kripa comes to Gandhari and says, “Your sons all died noble deaths, they

have found Devaloka. Last night we attacked the Pandava camp to avenge Duryodhana and Aswatthama killed all the Pan-chalas and Draupadi's sons. The Pandavas are out hunting us, we dare not stay in the open any longer."

They ride away at once. Kunti falls as if someone had cut her down with a sword. Vidura tries to console her, but all her grandsons have been murdered. Kripa, Kritavarman and Aswatthama ride some way into the jungle and decide to part. They embrace one another, then Kripa rides home to Hastinapura, Kritavarman to Dwaraka and Aswatthama will seek refuge in Vyasa's hermitage on the banks of the Ganga.

Bheema lets out a tiger's roar, when he finds Aswatthama in Vyasa's asrama, covered in dirt, smeared with ghee and wearing a piece of cloth made of kusa grass. He leaps down from his chariot with his bow and quiver, crying, "Coward, I will kill you today!"

Aswatthama turns and Bheema gasps to see his face. Drona's son has lost all his luster. His face is twisted and bestial, the face of a nishada who sells the flesh of animals: a butcher's ghastly face! The expression in his eyes is so sinister, the look of a man who has lost his soul. Bheema stands stunned by the change in his childhood friend, the brahmana. Chest heaving, he stands ready to dispatch Aswat-thama.

Drona's son draws a stalk of grass from the ground, as he rises to meet Bheema's challenge with an evil smile. He chants a mantra over the green blade and fetches a cry from Vyasa and the other munis. The blade of grass bursts into flames. Aswatthama hisses, "May this world be without Pandavas!"

Bheema stands rooted, as the four-headed brahmasirsa rises in white fire from Aswatthama's hands. Just then, the Jaitra flies down beside Bheema and Krishna and Arjuna leap down from it. The astra rages toward them, devouring everything in its path. Even before they came down, Krishna cried to Arjuna, "You have the brahmasirsa, too. Use it or we are lost!"

The moment the chariot lands and they leap from it, Arjuna raises the Gandiva and murmurs the same mantra Aswatthama did. From his bow, also, there flares an arrow charged with the flames of the missile formed like Brahma's heads. The earth shudders as if it will crack in two. Fissures gape at their feet. Climbing steeply into the air, the two astras fly at each other and flames of a thousand hues lick the sky: to consume the very stuff of reality. Oceans begin to evaporate; mountains shake to their roots.

It is the very last instant before the astras collide. If they do, the earth will

be ashes and the ashes blown across the fathomless vaults of space. In the final fraction of a moment, Vyasa jumps up with a shout and raises his hands above his head, "Stop!"

That moment, Narada appears there also, his body shining and he, too, raises his hands in mudras of power. By the tapasya shakti of the two rishis, the astras are arrested in the sky. They burn there still; but they do not collide, just hang fire.

Vyasa cries, "How could you invoke the brahmasirsa? Withdraw your astras before the earth is consumed!"

Arjuna says, "I summoned the astra only to save my brother. I will recall it."

But to call back the brahmasirsa needs the will of a tapasvin. For some life-long moments, Arjuna stands in intense dhyana; slowly, the fires of his astra grow quiet. Sweat breaks out over his body and then the arrow that bore the ayudha flies back into the Pandava's hands. It is a common wooden shaft now and cool to his touch. Aswatthama's brahmasirsa still blazes in the sky.

Vyasa and Narada turn fiercely on Drona's son, "Recall your astra, Aswatthama!"

Aswatthama shuts his eyes in dhyana, sweat breaks out on him, too. But Drona's son has fallen from grace. He is a murderer now and he cannot recall the astra. The brahmasirsa remains where it is, burning up the sky. Now, Aswatthama realizes the enormity of his sin. With a cry, he falls at the munis' feet. "I cannot call it back! I am a terrible sinner and the astra mocks me."

There is panic in his voice. "What shall I do? I was afraid of Bheema and I summoned the astra, saying, 'May this world be without Pandavas.' My lords, I am helpless. Save me from the weapon's wrath!"

Vyasa says, "If this astra is subdued with a brahmastra, there will be a drought in the world for twelve years. Not a drop of rain will fall and the oceans will dry up. Pluck the hatred out of your heart. Think kindly of the sons of Pandu and recall the astra."

But his crime has ruined Aswatthama's heart within him. He cannot raise a spark of mercy in it. Glowering, Vyasa says, "Give the Pandavas some recompense for what you did in the night. Give them the jewel your wear in your topknot."

Aswatthama cries, "The jewel is my life! It protects me against weapons,

disease, curses and hung^{er}.

Vyasa says grimly, “You have taken many lives. You must give up the jewel.”

The muni’s tone is irresistible. His hands shaking, Aswatthama gives up the magical gemstone. Then, he says, “I can’t recall the astra. At best, I can turn it away from the Pandavas themselves and ask it to consume their unborn children. But one day the world must be without any Pandavas.”

Vyasa and Narada nod. Aswatthama turns his weapon into the wombs of all the Pandavas’ wives and their sons’ wives. In a moment, Draupadi is barren and Subhadra and the astra flashes subtly into Uttaraa’s womb and burns Abhimanyu’s child nestling there. Then, the brahmasirsa subsides.

Now, Krishna says in a fearsome voice, “Of all the creatures born into the world, Aswatthama you are the most contemptible one. You have killed Abhimanyu’s child in Uttaraa’s womb, but I say to you, that child will live when it is born. I will give it life!”

The Avatara trembles with anger, “I curse you, Aswatthama. You will see that child born. You will see him crowned king and rule from the throne of the Pauravas. For sixty years of the kali yuga, Abhimanyu’s son will rule and you will live through his reign and still not die. Go wander the earth, friendless and alone, to expiate your sin! You shall stink of pus and blood, not have a single companion and no man will speak a kind word to you. Go now, I curse you to live thus for three thousand years!

Aswatthama howls like an animal shot with an arrow. He runs from that place as if demons are after him and he hears Vyasa saying, “Yes, Uttaraa’s son will rule the world and let him be called Parikshita, the tested one.”

Aswatthama plunges into the deep jungle and is lost. With the jewel of power they took from him, Arjuna, Bheema, Nakula and Krishna come back to the desolate camp at Kurukshetra. Draupadi is calmer now; but she rises with a moan, when she sees them return. A glowing Bheema gives her the scarlet stone and she takes it from him, crying out softly, knowing her sons and brothers had been avenged.

Bheema says, “Aswatthama was vanquished and Krishna cursed him to wander the earth until the kali yuga ends. He was our guru’s son, so we spared his life.”

Draupadi looks at Krishna and when he nods at her, she seems satisfied. She brings the scarlet gem to Yudhishtira and says, “Wear this from now, my

lord. Only a great king should wear a stone like this one.”

To please her, Yudhishtira takes the jewel and wears it in his crown.

BOOK ELEVEN

STREE PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

WITH DHRITARASHTRA AND GANDHARI

After fourteen years, the Pandavas return to Hastinapura. They should come home in joy, for the war has been won and now Yudhishtira returns as king. Instead, they arrive in mourning after what Aswatthama did. Krishna and Satyaki ride with them. Just inside the city-gates, the Pandavas meet the Kaurava widows. Wearing white, the women wail louder than ever when they see their husbands' killers. Some scream at Yudhishtira, "How could you kill your own blood, Yudhishtira?"

"Is this your dharma, Pandava?"

Lamentation rings through the streets of the city of elephants and it is not only the Kaurava widows who weep. Draupadi has lost five sons in the night; her eyes are not dry. Krishna alights from his chariot and melts into the crowd. Yudhishtira sees Dhritarashtra. With a cry, the Pandava runs to his uncle and prostrates himself at the old king's feet. Dhritarashtra raises him up and embraces him. It is a cold clasp; the king's mighty form trembles with suppressed rage. Dhritarashtra always knew how to conduct himself before the eyes of the world and he now speaks gentle words to his nephew.

His blind face turns here and there, seeking someone else. He says, "Bheema, where are you, my son?"

Bheema starts forward and his uncle opens his arms to hug him. Suddenly, Krishna reappears and he is carrying an iron image of Bheema: the same one upon which Duryodhana used to rain blows with his mace. To the others' amazement, Krishna calls Dhritarashtra, "Bheema is here, my lord."

Bheema is about to speak, but Krishna's eyes flash warningly at him. Dhritarashtra gropes forward, "Where are you, Bheema, come to my arms."

Krishna sets the iron statue before the king, "Bheema is before you, my lord."

It is told that Bheema's body was as hard as iron and the king in his wrath does not notice the difference between his nephew and the statue. He throws his arms around the image and clasps it with the superhuman strength with which he was born. Now the blind man's mask falls away and naked hatred is plain on Dhritarashtra's face. He has his precious son's killer in his embrace; grimacing, the old king crushes the statue in his arms. Blood flows down his chest, blood

flows from his mouth and the iron figure buckles in his arms! The effort overwhelms Dhritarashtra and he collapses.

He still does not realize what he has done. He feels warm blood on himself and thinks it is Bheema's. Sanjaya runs forward, crying, "My lord! What did you do?"

Abruptly, Dhritarashtra's rage leaves him and cold sanity returns. He begins to tremble and cries, "Bheema! What have I done to you, my child? I have killed my brother's son! Ah, Bheema, I killed you in anger."

He sobs. Krishna sees the king's fury has passed. He goes to Dhritarashtra and says, "Bheema isn't dead. I gave you Bheema's image to vent your anger. You crushed the statue your son used to practise with his mace and the blood was your own.

My lord, this is no way for a king to conduct himself. The Pandavas are your nephews, they need your affection. They hated the war and the sorrow it brought. You have not treated Pandu's sons with dharma; at least now, be as a father to them. You have lost your own sons and no punishment could be worse. You have a chance to make sons of the Pandavas, as you should have done long ago."

A subtle transformation seems to come over Dhritarashtra. A smile of relief spreads on his face and they see that, now, this smile springs from his heart. He says, "Krishna, everything you say is true. My overweening love for Duryodhana turned my mind to evil. But all that is past. I am grateful you brought the iron image to me, or I would have killed Bheema." He turns his face, "Bheema, child, forgive me! Come here, let me embrace you."

Bheema glances at Krishna, who nods. Sobbing, Dhritarashtra clasps his nephews, one by one, "Bless you, my children! All my boys have been taken from me and I have only you five to be my sons. From now, I swear I will be as I should have always been: a father to you."

For the first time they hear sincerity in his voice and have no doubt he means what he says. But they still have to face Gandhari and the Pandavas quail at the thought. The queen stands some way off from her husband, her eyes bound as always and rage rules her heart. As they begin to walk toward her, she has decided, again, to curse Yudhishtira and his brothers. She is about to utter the curse, when Vyasa appears at her side and says, "Stop, Gandhari! Your love for your sons fills your heart with sin. This is no time for hatred; it is the hour of forgiveness. Before Duryodhana went to war, he came to you for your blessing.

Do you remember what he said to you that day?

‘Mother, say I will win this war and I know I shall.’

You replied, ‘Where there is dharma, there will be victory.’

Your own prophecy has been fulfilled. Dharma was with the Pandavas and they are victorious. You always knew that Duryodhana’s was the way of sin; if you curse the sons of Pandu now, you will desolate the virtue of a lifetime. You have always been patient and truthful. Calm yourself, daughter, the Pandavas do not deserve your anger. The sin lay with your sons and they have paid for it. Yudhishtira and his brothers were only fate’s warriors.”

Gandhari hears him out in silence. Then she says, “My sons Duryodhana and Dusasana and my brother Shakuni are to blame for the Kuru House being destroyed. When I first heard that my boys were dead, I was deranged with grief. I am calmer now; I cannot blame the Pandavas for fighting the war. How can I? They did not want this war, only my son did.

Yet, I am a mother and my heart will not be still after hearing how Bheema killed Duryodhana. That was not dharma, O Muni. He struck him below the waist, treacherously and my child fell. Bheema drank Dusasana’s blood on the field, like an animal. He did these things out of arrogance. I cannot forgive him.”

The Pandavas have just come up to Vyasa and Gandhari. In such a humble voice, that Krishna smiles to hear him, Bheema says, “Mother, I admit I killed Duryodhana treacherously. There was no other way he could be killed; and if I did not kill him, he would have killed me. I only did what I had to, to save my life. There was no other way, because there was no mace-fighter on earth like your son. I could never have beaten him in a fair fight, why, not Indra could! But your son did not walk the way of dharma. You know how he made us suffer for thirteen years. Yudhishtira never wanted this war, but Duryodhana was obstinate it must be fought. And you know what happened in the sabha of Hastinapura on the day of the dice, you know how Draupadi was abused. Who would avenge her except me? I swore then that I would break Duryodhana’s thigh and I did.

I should have done it on the day of the gambling and you would have said there was no sin in what I did. For, then, your son’s crime was happening before you. After thirteen years, what he did has faded from your mind and all you know is that I killed Duryodhana by striking him unfairly. But thirteen years ago, Yudhishtira stopped me.

I beg you, see this thing in its entirety, not just what I did yesterday. Mother Gandhari, forgive me if I have sinned.”

Gandhari hears him out and a thaw sets in on her heart. Her voice is less fierce, when she asks, “Bheema, I hear the sincerity in your voice when you say my son was the greatest mace-fighter in the world. I will forgive you for killing Duryodhana. But what about Dusasana? You drank his blood on the battlefield! He was your cousin and you drank his blood.”

Bheema is humbler still, “I swore in anger that I would drink his blood. It was no cold plan, but my temper: but I had to keep my oath. And now I swear, not a drop of your son’s blood passed down my throat, but I turned away and spat it out. Karna saw me and I remember he smiled. It was mere bravado; I did not really drink his blood. I beg you, see what I did in its true light and forgive me.”

Krishna’s smile grows wider than ever at the abject contrition in Bheema’s voice. Gandhari seems mollified and says, now with less rage than sorrow, “Ah, Bheema, you killed all my sons. Couldn’t you have left me just one? Your uncle and I are old. I haven’t even one son left to be my support in my old age.”

Bheema says, “Mother, you could have prevented your sons from banishing us. You could have persuaded them to return our kingdom, when we returned after thirteen years in the wilderness. But you did not. Am I to blame for everything that happened?”

At this, anger returns to Gandhari. She turns her face here and there, seeking someone else. “Where is Yudhishtira?”

Yudhishtira comes before her, his palms folded and says, “Here I am, mother, your sons’ killer. If you curse anyone, let it be me. I caused not just the death of your sons, but the ruin of kshatriya kind. Curse me, mother Gandhari, I deserve your curse!”

When she hears the anguish in his voice, Gandhari sighs like a serpent and remembers what Vyasa said. That queen begins to sob helplessly. As she weeps, a corner of the cloth with which she binds her eyes comes loose, letting in a ray of light. For a moment, the virgin vision of those eyes falls on Yudhishtira’s feet. The Pandava cries out in pain, for Gandhari’s glance burns up his toenails, charring them black!

When Arjuna sees this, he scurries to hide behind Krishna, who laughs to see the greatest kshatriya on earth running from a woman. Gandhari also dimly sees Arjuna retreat and at once her heart goes out to him. Krishna whispers to Arjuna, “O Jishnu!” which means terror of the world and laughs again to see him flush.

Gandhari's anger passes like a spring cloud. She blesses the Pandavas and embraces them, saying that from now on she was also their mother, because her sons were all dead. Then it is time for them to go to their own mother: Kunti whom they have not seen for thirteen years.

TWO

GANDHARI'S CURSE

Crying aloud to see her sons, crying for joy she can hardly express, Kunti runs to them with her arms flung wide. One by one, she clasps them to her, stroking their faces, kissing them, touching their battle-scars with her fingers, while she weeps and laughs at once. Then she turns to Draupadi, who stands limply, shattered by the death of her own sons.

Kunti takes her in her arms and Panchali breaks down. She wails, "Mother, all your grandsons are dead! Abhimanyu was killed and my boys as well. It is some time since you saw them, now you will never see them again. What use is victory or a kingdom when I have lost my children?"

She sobs in Kunti's arms. Then, the blind king's train sets out again for Kurukshetra and the Pandavas and the women, all wearing just single cloths, follow it. Seeing Kunti helpless to comfort her, Gandhari takes Draupadi in her arms and says, "Look at me, my child and be consoled that you are not alone in your anguish. We have both lost all our sons; our pain is the same one. At least you are younger and stronger, so you can bear the grief. Don't cry, my daughter, this is fate. It is the end of the world as we knew it and a new yuga has risen over the earth. Vidura foretold this years ago and Krishna warned us of it. Don't cry for your sons, Draupadi, they have gone where they are happier than we are."

Then, her own sorrow overwhelms her again and she sobs, "Oh, which of us will comfort the other? We are both heartbroken!"

As they near Kurukshetra, subtle vision fills the pure Gandhari. Clearly, through her bound eyes, she sees the apocalyptic field. She sees corpses sprouted on the earth like blades of grass; she sees severed limbs, severed heads and blood congealed everywhere. She sees the vultures and jackals that feast on the moldering flesh of the dead. She sees her sons lying on that field, some whole, some rotted past recognition and others with their faces eaten away by scavengers. Gandhari sees thousands of wives and mothers, all crying, many screaming: the women of an entire generation, some from far-off lands, others from Hastinapura. They throw themselves across the corpses of their sons, brothers, husbands, fathers and a sea-storm of lamentation rises into the yielding sky, it seeps into the earth. The wild creatures of the world hear that wailing and think the pralaya is upon them.

Gandhari takes Krishna by the hand, she says, “Do you see them, Krishna, the millions that died? Do you hear my daughters-in-law sobbing for my hundred sons?”

Krishna does not reply. He leads her to a corpse, which has just been carried to Kurukshetra from Samantapanchaka. Gandhari bends to touch the magnificent body, broken at the waist, with her fingers, which are her eyes. She feels the proud face, uncowed by an agonizing death and she flings herself down across Duryodhana’s chest and her shrill, ululating cries echo above every other sound on Kurukshetra. Then, she faints.

When she recovers, she still sobs and calls her son’s name. She runs her fingers through his tangled hair, trying to break the clotted blood from it. She runs her fingers over his face; she kisses his eyes, his cheeks and his lips.

Trembling, Gandhari turns to Krishna. “Krishna, do you see the sea of grief around you? Look at Duryodhana’s wife, she runs like a mad woman between her husband’s corpse and her son’s, trying to chase the jackals and vultures away from both. Look at Uttaraa; can you hear her sobbing as she lies across what remains of Abhimanyu? They were married hardly a month.¹”

That is far from all: a million widows, a million bereaved mothers mourn on the field of death². Karna’s quiet wife sobs softly over her husband’s headless body. Shalya’s wives fling themselves over him, shrieking. If anything can be worse than the war on Kurukshetra, it is the spectacle of the women mourning their dead.

Now, Gandhari turns on Krishna, “You are to blame! If you had really wanted to, you could have prevented this war; but you were indifferent. You could have cooled the enmity between my sons and their cousins. Instead, you sided with the Pandavas and fanned the flames. You have ruined the Kurus, Krishna. I, Gandhari, curse you that thirty-six years from today your clan will also perish. The Yadavas will fight among themselves and kill one another, every man of you. And your women will weep then, even as we do today!

As for you, you will wander the earth, friendless and alone and you will die a common death, without glory. I curse you, Krishna, I curse you for the deaths of my sons!”

A hush falls around them. Gandhari is a queen of tapasya and her curse cannot fail. Krishna smiles. Imperturbable, he says, “Mother, your curse is merely the course of fate. For only the Yadavas can kill the Yadavas; and if they are not killed, they will overrun the earth. They are my own people and not men

or the Devas can harm them. I thank you for your curse: it is a blessing for the world! And now your anger has been exorcised, you will not curse Yudhishtira and his brothers. Gandhari, I will do anything for the Pandavas. If the Yadavas have to die so the sons of Pandu can live, I am only happy. I say to you again, Yudhishtira and his brothers are my very life to me.”

The Pandavas hear this with tears in their eyes. What love can be greater than Krishna’s? But now, the Dark One’s eyes glitter and in a harder voice he says to Gandhari, “You have cursed me and I gladly take your curse upon myself. Yet, O queen, this is not dharma. You are griefstricken and do not see right from wrong, or the truth from a lie. Not I, but you are to blame for this war! You loved Duryodhana too much and you indulged his every whim. You spoilt him so much that he could never deny himself anything, regardless of the cost. Duryodhana was always arrogant and envious. You are a wise woman; you knew your son’s nature. Why did you never try to curb him? You could have prevented this tragedy, not I.

You accuse me of indifference. Tell me, who came to Hastinapura to ask for peace? As for you, didn’t you know your brother Shakuni’s character? You still allowed him into your house. When Duryodhana was young and impressionable, you let him grow close to his uncle. Gandhari, tell me truly, did you know nothing about the house of lac?”

She gives a start and is silent. Krishna smiles and goes on, “You and your husband are responsible for this genocide and you want to shift that blame to me. You spoilt your son until he did not know wrong from right, but only what he wanted. He began the war that has destroyed the world and you cannot blame me for it.

Dhritarashtra is responsible for what happened. And you, who are a woman of dharma, allowed evil to take root and grow in your home. As for me, I feel no sorrow for your sons. They have what they deserve; why, they have better than they deserve. Duryodhana, the worst sinner on earth, has found Devaloka! Even as he lay dying, he made sure the Pandavas would suffer; and such a one has found heaven. Gandhari, it is because he was your son that he has gone there. Your penance and your prayers have not been in vain. Your sons are with the Gods now, mother. I beg you, set aside your anger in the knowledge that your princes, who deserve the cruelest hell, have attained paradise.

Just now, you told me about your final conversation with Duryodhana. He said, ‘Bless me, mother and I will win the war.’ You replied, ‘My son, victory will be only where there is dharma. Your cause is not just; you cannot win this

war. But I bless you that you will die a glorious death and, thus, find swarga for yourself.'

Those were the bravest, most truthful words any mother could say to her son. You are not weak like your husband; you are a strong woman. You must not try to blame me for what happened. Be yourself again: face the truth, accept your sorrow as just punishment."

Krishna speaks as to a favored child gone astray. Gandhari is speechless at what he says³.

THREE

TARPANA FOR A KSHATRIYA

Dhritarashtra asks Yudhishtira to take charge of arrangements for cremating the dead. The Pandava appoints Vidura, Sanjaya, Yuyutsu, Dhaumya and some others to the task. The corpses are gathered onto wood pyres and set alight. A million pyres burn on Kurukshetra. Then, Dhritarashtra, Yudhishtira and the others come to the banks of the Ganga to offer tarpana to those who have died. The mourning women all come with them, Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi also.

Now the men put aside their silks and their jewels; covered by thin cloths, they enter the water. Thousands of women offer prayers, among them the Kaurava widows and Draupadi. Kunti's mind is on fire today at the river, for she, too, has seen a son lying headless on the field.

It was three days ago that Arjuna killed Karna and the Pandava camp erupted in celebration. When Sanjaya told Dhritarashtra about Karna's death, Kunti overheard him. She felt as if her heart was being carved with a knife, but, of course, she could not share her grief with anyone. She clasped it to her and wept, alone.

Today, she sees Karna lying on Kurukshetra, his head sloughed off by Arjuna's arrow. She sees his wife mourning him and Kunti's world spins around her; but she will not let herself swoon, nor does she say a word. She comes with the other women to the Ganga and sees the lucid currents of the same river, which once, a life ago, bore her firstborn away from her in a wooden box. Kunti hears the Kuru scions paying final homage to their dead fathers. But her Karna is deprived of the dignity of sacrament even in death: all his sons have been killed. He had lived and died the orphan she had made him. Suddenly, his spirit cries out to her that at least now let some justice be done to him. Kunti hears him; she sees his splendid form before her eyes.

Meanwhile, Yudhishtira and his brothers have entered the river to offer tarpana to their dead sons. Arjuna stands with tears streaming down his face, as he offers holy water and pinda for Abhimanyu: to quench his thirst and allay his hunger on his final journey. Kunti lays a hand on Yudhishtira's shoulder. He turns in some surprise, "What is it, mother?"

She is quivering with the sorrow that tears at her. She says, "Yudhishtira, there is another kshatriya for whom you must offer tarpana."

Krishna stands near them, watching, a sad smile on his lips. How well Kunti had kept her secret. Even when war was declared she had not told Yudhishtira what she knew; not even when Karna died, had she said a thing. She knew and Krishna knew, that if she had, Yudhishtira would have abandoned the war and gone back into the forest. But now the time for truth has come, the moment of confession.

Puzzled, Yudhishtira says, “How is that, mother? I know our dead and I have offered tarpana for them all. I am not such an ingrate that I have forgotten anyone who gave his life for me.”

The other Pandavas come up around them, wondering whom their mother means. Kunti says softly, “Karna. You must offer tarpana for him also.”

Yudhishtira is astonished. “Karna? Why should I offer him tarpana? He was a sutaputra, mother and our enemy. His sons are dead, so it his father must offer tarpana and pinda for him. I am a ksha-triya; how can I offer tarpana for a suta? What are you saying? I don’t understand you.”

Kunti is sobbing and many of the other women have gathered round curiously. Yudhishtira asks in some annoyance, “Mother, what is the matter? Why are you crying?”

With an effort, Kunti calms herself. Again, she says, “You must offer tarpana for Karna. He was not a sutaputra, he was a kshatriya.”

A gasp goes up from the others and word flies forth, “Karna was not a sutaputra, he was a ksha-triya!

Yudhishtira looks a little dazed. Gently, he says, “But you know nothing about Karna. How do you know he was not a sutaputra? And even if he was a kshatriya, why should I offer tarpana for him? Hasn’t Karna a father?”

The moment is upon her. Kunti takes a deep breath and says in a clear voice, “Surya Deva is Karna’s father and his mother was a kshatriya princess. She invoked the Sun God with a mantra given her by a rishi and Karna was born from their love. He was born wearing golden kavacha and kundala. But his mother was a maiden, living in her father’s house and she feared the world’s censure. She floated her baby down the Ganga in a wooden box and it was on this river that Atiratha found the child and took him home to Radha. They adopted him, raised him as their own. As for his natural mother, in time she married and had other sons. But how could she ever forget her firstborn child?

Throughout her life, there seemed to be a hollow space in her heart without him. She could never forget how she had sinned against him.”

Kunti stands beside the sacred river and she, who had been so strong all her life, seems so fragile. Tears still course down her face.

Yudhishtira asks, “Who is Karna’s mother? Which woman could be so heartless as to abandon her own child as soon as he was born? You must know who she is, since you know so much about Karna. Who was she that ruined what might have been such a noble life? Is the woman still alive?”

All eyes are on Kunti. She looks at her sons’ faces, one to the other. She sees Krishna and his eyes are full of mercy. Kunti feels a deep strength dawning on her from the Avatara’s gaze. She turns back to Yudhishtira. She looks straight at him and, in a ringing voice, Kunti cries, “Yes, Karna’s mother still lives and she stands before you, Yudhishtira. Karna was my son, my first child!”

She sways on her feet and falls on the soft silt of the riverbank. Vidura rushes to Kunti’s side, while Yudhishtira stands as if he has been struck by lightning. Slowly, he turns to face Arjuna, who, if anything, looks more stricken than his brother. Into the hush that has fallen, Yudhishtira murmurs as in a dream, a nightmare, “We killed our brother.”

A roar breaks out of Arjuna. He splashes out of the river and falls on the ground, crying, “What have I done, Yudhishtira? I have killed my own brother!”

He cries out his shock, repeatedly, until river, forest and sky echo with it. “I killed my brother and I gloated!” howls Arjuna. “How can I go on living after what I did?”

His eyes roll up and he faints. Yudhishtira’s eyes turn crimson; otherwise, he does not move, but stands as if his mother’s confession has turned him into a statue. Bheema staggers out from the water and sits beside the unconscious Arjuna. The effect of Kunti’s truth is most evident on poor Bheema. Those that watch see him turn, before their eyes, from an overgrown boy into a man.

Bheema remembers the day of the exhibition in Hastinapura. He thinks of the moment when he mocked Karna, ‘Sutaputra, you are not fit to have yourself killed by my brother Arjuna. Put down your bow and get yourself a horsewhip. That will suit you better.’

He remembers what Duryodhana said to him then, ‘Karna brims with every noble quality a ksha-triya should have. He is like a tiger. I pity you, Bheema, that you don’t see him for what he is and are blind to his greatness, which shines from him like a sun. I have made him king of Anga; he deserves to be lord of this earth!’

How foolish he, Bheema, had been on that day and how prescient Duryodhana. Bheema's thoughts drift on to Kurukshetra and the duel he fought against Karna. He sees Karna's mocking eyes and his strange smile again, as he prodded Bheema with the tip of his bow, contemptuously and spared his life. Karna's words are burned on his heart, 'Some day, Bheema, you will think back on this duel and feel proud. Some day you will rejoice that you fought Karna.'

Bheema knows, from now, that moment will be his most precious memory. It crosses his mind that, hereafter, for him Karna would be his eldest brother. Near Bheema, Sahadeva sits in a daze, thinking of the moment when Karna spared his life, 'Go now, boy and hide behind your brother Arjuna. Don't come to fight your betters.'

Sahadeva sees the glittering eyes and the haughty smile. He also sobs. Yudhishtira has come ashore now and sits shaken and grim, never looking at his mother. His heart cries out within him that it would be better if he never saw her face again, for what she did to his brother, his older brother. Why, for what she had done not just to Karna but to all of them, the sin she made them commit.

Sitting with Krishna and Arjuna, Yudhishtira remembers the final day of Karna's life. He recalls every moment of it, vividly. He thinks of how he mocked his brother, calling him sutaputra. Suddenly, Yudhishtira turns to Kunti. Coldly, he asks her, "Mother, did Karna know who he was? Did he know he was our brother?"

She hangs her head and cries. Krishna answers him, "He knew."

All the Pandavas turn to face Krishna. Yudhishtira whispers, "And you also knew, my Lord?"

"Yes."

The frantic Yudhishtira turns on Kunti, "How could you keep this from us? You made us kill our brother. Do you know, when I heard Karna had been killed, I ran to the field to see if the news was true? More than anyone else, I wanted Karna dead. I feared my brother more than I did any other man. Mother, how could you let us do this horrible thing?"

Then Yudhishtira looks into Kunti's eyes and sees an age of grief in them, far, far greater than his own. He sees that his mother already suffers as much as she can bear. He sighs and does not say a word more. With his brothers around him, he enters the river again. Now he offers tarpana to his dead brother and it seems the tears he sheds are all he needs as holy water for Karna's final journey. Somehow, Abhimanyu's death and even the nearer deaths of Draupadi's sons are

forgotten. The Pandavas have just one thought in their minds: they had another brother and they killed him.

Seeing the Pandavas' mourn, the women on the riverbank set up a fresh lament. When he has finished offering tarpana and pinda to dead Karna, Yudhishtira raises his voice above the women's wailing and curses womankind, "It is because my mother kept her secret so well that we killed our brother. May no woman ever be able to keep a secret again!"

Slowly, they come out of the whispering Ganga and make their way back to the camp. The Pandavas walk at the head of the procession. The women follow them, still crying and a few paces behind the women, Krishna and Satyaki bring up the rear.

BOOKS TWELVE AND THIRTEEN SHANTI PARVA & ANUSASANA PARVA₁

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

YUDHISHTIRA'S GRIEF.

The month prescribed for mourning the dead has to pass before the Pandavas can enter Hastinapura and Yudhishtira can be crowned king in that city. The sons of Pandu settle in tents on the banks of the lotus-flowing Ganga. Every day, elaborate rituals are performed for the peace of those that have died.

Vyasa, Narada, Kanva and other munis arrive in the Pandava camp, to meet the man who will be emperor of Bharatavarsha. They find Yudhishtira plunged in despair. He hardly speaks, but sits brooding darkly, at times sobbing when grief overpowers him.

One day Narada says to him, "Put away this sorrow, my son. By Krishna's grace and the valor of your brothers and the Panchalas, you have conquered the world. No war is won cheaply. You should be pleased that your enemies are vanquished and victory is yours."

At once Yudhishtira's eyes fill and he says, "My lord, I am not destined to know happiness. What you say is true: by Krishna's grace and my brothers' valor we have victory. But ah, Muni, victory at what price? How many we loved like life perished in this war. What does it matter who wins or loses such a war? The only truth is that we fought and millions died. This is the end of the world, as we knew it. The war wasn't fought with dharma: not by our enemies and not by us."

He pauses and tears roll down his face. The knowing Narada asks, "Is this all that is troubling you?"

"No, my lord! Even this much I could somehow bear. What torments me more than anything else is that Karna was our brother and we killed him like our worst enemy. How can I ever hope to be happy again? Although we did not know the truth, how could we do this terrible thing? Karna knew who he was before the war began. Krishna and my mother begged him to join us. They offered him the throne of the world, which was properly his, not mine. He refused them: he would not betray Duryodhana. Once he knew the truth, no one would have censured my brother if he had abandoned our cousin, not even Duryodhana. But Karna would rather die than forsake his friend.

That was our brother. And what did we do to him? We mocked him, whenever we could, calling him sutaputra and finally we killed him. We cut him down when he was trying to lift his chariot-wheel from the mire. I cannot live

with this sin. Not even when Arjuna's arrow was aimed at his throat did he cry out, 'Don't kill me, Arjuna, I am your brother!' And how I rejoiced when Arjuna cut Karna's head from his body."

Yudhishtira chokes and cannot go on. Then, remembering something else, he resumes, "I will never forget that day in Hastinapura, when I lost everything. Karna was there and he was taunting us even more than our cousins did. I stood with my head hung, but my heart blazed to hear him. Then my eyes fell on Karna's feet. I can hardly describe what happened to me at that moment. His feet were so familiar. I was astonished, for they were my mother's very feet! Looking at them calmed me. I felt at such peace just looking at the feet of this enemy who reviled us in the Kuru sabha. Of course, at that time even he did not know who he was.

I never forgot that experience. Even when we were in exile in the forest, I would lie awake at nights thinking of how strange it was that Karna's feet were exactly like my mother's. Today, I know why they were so alike and I feel my heart will break in a thousand pieces. You say I should be happy we have won the war. But how can I be happy after killing my own brother and a brother as noble as great, great Karna?"

Again, he sits silent, his tears flowing. Yudhishtira shakes his head in a sorrow he can neither bear nor cure. In a moment, he goes on, speaking almost to himself, "Muni, when my mother went to Karna before the war began, he said he would grant her a boon. Not that she asked him for anything after he refused to join us; but he said he must give her something, because she was his mother whom he had found after so many years. The boon he gave her was that he would not kill any of her sons in battle, except Arjuna.

Now we know why he did not kill the four of us, when he had each of us at his mercy. He only prodded us with his bow, as if he was blessing us! As for Arjuna: how could Karna kill Arjuna, when he knew who he was? And how could he not at least try, for Duryodhana's sake? But knowing his heart now, I am convinced that Karna did not kill Arjuna because he was his brother.

And what did Arjuna do? He cut off Karna's head when he was defenseless. Who was responsible? I, of course! I can never forgive myself for making one brother of mine kill another. The soul knows all things. Deep in my heart I must have known the truth, or at least suspected it. I am the worst sinner on earth."

He grows thoughtful and says, "Narada, one thing perplexes me. After my brother was killed, we all saw the place where his chariot was mired. The earth was not soft where Karna died. It seems fate plunged his wheel into the ground

so Arjuna could kill him. Also, at that final moment, Arjuna tells me he thought Karna had forgotten the mantras for the astras and could summon one only with an inordinate effort.”

Narada tells Yudhishtira about the two curses Karna received: one from Bhargava and the other from the brahmana whose cow he killed. The rishi says, “But for those curses and that Indra took his kavacha and kundala, Karna could never have been killed. He was the greatest kshatriya on earth. Listen to the story of his life and his suffering, if you will.”

In that camp beside the golden Ganga, Narada tells them about Karna’s life: of its anguish and the curse he was born with that he must suffer until the day he died. Hearing about that sad, heroic life, their eldest brother’s life, chastens the sons of Pandu. They know that their own ordeals do not account for a tenth of what Karna had endured: and always alone.

Just listening to Karna’s tragic story calms the Pandavas. It makes Yudhishtira forget his own sorrow, when he realizes that from the first day his brother was marked by fate for its fiercest trials. Karna had survived them all and covered himself in glory in his lonely battle against time. He had not been beaten; he had triumphed. Finally, he had achieved the one prize he valued more than any other: immortal fame.

Yudhishtira realizes the wound in his heart for his dead brother will never heal. But hearing Karna’s life from Narada, the Pandava feels that if Karna could have endured all that he did by himself, surely, he, Yudhishtira, can bear the anguish of losing him. At least, he has his other brothers and Krishna, with whom he can share his pain.

Kunti tells Yudhishtira, “You mustn’t grieve like this for Karna. It is not as if both Surya Deva and I did not tell him who he was.”

Yudhishtira accepts this; but the kingdom is a different matter. Yudhishtira wants no part, any more, of ruling a kingdom. He says, “We should have been content to live begging alms. What good has this war done any of us? It has destroyed the Kauravas and the Pandavas as well. A man can atone for his sins by confession, by charity and by penance. I mean to live in the jungle, in tapasya. Arjuna, I leave you this hard-won earth. I have no use for it any more.”

Shocked, Arjuna says, “Why did you bother to fight a war, if you were going to abandon everything we fought for? It was a dharma yuddha we fought; millions laid down their lives for you. Was all that sacrifice just for you to roam the world with a begging-bowl? You could have done that without the war. If

you don't do your dharma as a kshatriya king, you will mock those that died for you and we shall have their curses on our heads. Yudhishtira, the path you want to tread is for brahmanas, not us.

How can you even think of renouncing this kingdom won with so much blood? Remember what it is of which you make so light: the throne upon which Dilipa, Nriga, Nahusha, Ambarisa and Mandhata sat. You must not relinquish the earth now, but guide all our destinies. This is no time for you to live in a jungle, but a time for you to perform an Aswamedha yagna!" cries Arjuna passionately.

His brother replies, "Hear me clearly, Arjuna. I mean to live in the forest on fruit and roots, wearing deerskin and tree-bark and with my hair matted in jata. Nothing will induce me to leave the path of penance I have chosen."

Turn by turn, Bheema, Arjuna, Sahadeva and Nakula come to their brother, to persuade him¹. He is adamant and will not change his mind. One day, Draupadi goes to him in his grief.

She says, "My lord, your brothers come to you again and again, like chataka birds and beg you to take the Kuru throne. Listen to them. They have suffered so much for your sake. They have fought heroically for you; they have lost their sons to the war. Do you remember, when we were in exile, you would always comfort them saying that when the time came you would defeat the Kauravas and rule from Hastinapura? Your time has come, Yudhishtira, don't refuse your brothers what they ask."

Yudhishtira hardly answers her. Vyasa, Narada, Kanva and the other munis try to talk the eldest Pandava out of his despondency. They are full of legends from the past; they tell him about his ancestors who once sat upon the same throne he is now being offered. But he is obdurate.

Arjuna comes in despair to Krishna and says, "My Lord, you are the only one to whom he might listen. Speak to him, or all we have done will have been in vain."

Krishna replies, "I believe Vyasa Muni is with him even now. I think what he says will see some change."

Vyasa is saying to Yudhishtira, "My child, a king has no right to indulge his own grief. A just king's time has always belonged to his people and only to them. He is like a God to them and their lives are his sole concern. A king has no wives, sons or brothers, Yudhishtira, only his people whom he rules. That is the truth and the deepest meaning of his life, to the exclusion of everything else. For

the king, the people are his dharma, his prana, his God. His task is just to rule them; beyond that, he has no other truth, or life. Your dharma is to assume kingship in Hastinapura. Your people are waiting for you like children. They put all their faith in you, you must be a father to them.”

For the first time, Yudhishtira seems moved. This is an argument that appeals powerfully to his nature, one he cannot resist. There is light on his grim face again, light breaks in his eyes. With a wry smile, he says, “I fear you are right, Muni. I have been selfish and indulged myself and you have cleared my mind. I walked alone through a dark place, but I have come out from it now. I feel the sun on my face again and hear my destiny calling me. I will go back to Hastinapura and be king. I beg you, tell me about the dharma of a king. I would be as just a king as the Kuru sires were. Teach me the wisdom of kings, before I sit upon that hallowed throne.”

Vyasa laughs, “I am hardly the one to tell you about kingship! I have never sat upon a throne, nor do I know anything about the affairs of state. But there is someone else you might ask for guidance. Indeed, no one on earth is better suited than him, both by his experience and by his love, to advise you on the dharma of kings.”

“Who is he, Swami?”

“Your Pitama Bheeshma, who lies on his bed of arrows as if he still has something left to accomplish in this world.”

Vyasa sees the Pandava gives a start and a shadow crosses his face. The rishi continues, “The first sixteen years of his life, his mother Ganga raised him to be a king who would grace the noblest throne in the world. Devavrata was to have succeeded his father Shantanu. Brihaspati and Sukracharya taught him in Devaloka and he has no equal in political wisdom. Rama’s guru, Vasishta, taught him the Vedas and the Vedangas. Markandeya taught him the rigors of renunciation; he taught him the final secret that lies beyond the veil of death. Yudhishtira, the time has come for you to go to your Pitama. He will be happy to see you and happier to teach you everything he knows.”

Yudhishtira says, “How can I go before Bheeshma, when I have killed my cousins?”

Vyasa laughs. “Do you think your Pitama doesn’t know that fate and not you, was the cause of everything that happened? He hardly interfered in the attrition between your cousins and yourselves; he knew it was no use trying to oppose destiny: what was written must take its course. An awesome task is

before you, Yudhishtira, you will have need of Bheeshma's wisdom."

Krishna arrives there then with Arjuna and Vyasa says, "Yudhishtira has decided to go to Hastinapura and be crowned king of the Kurus."

Krishna and Arjuna embrace Yudhishtira and he himself smiles like a man who has woken from a nightmare to find sunlight in the world.

TWO

A NEW KING IN HASTINAPURA

The days that remain of the month of mourning see a deep change in Yudhishtira. He spends all his time with the rishis who have come to comfort him, enlighten him. Once he decides that he will become king in Hastinapura, day by day, the eldest Pandava appears to become more cheerful and stronger. It is as if he has left the dark past and the war behind and now looks forward eagerly to the future, even to kingship. He spends a lot of time alone with Krishna, mainly sharing silence with the Avatara; but at times, he asks his cousin a question, or his advice on anything he cares to. Serenity comes stealing over the Pandava. The war has ended and with it, enmity: that at least cannot be denied.

Then, the month is over and it is time to return to Hastinapura, time for a new king to sit on the Kuru throne. The sons of Pandu set aside their mourning cloths; they don silks and jewelry once more. They set out in a procession for the city of their fathers. Yudhishtira rides in a chariot yoked to sixteen resplendent white bullocks. Bheema has the reins, while Arjuna holds the shining white parasol, the sign of the king, over Yudhishtira. Nakula and Sahadeva stand on either side of their brother with the royal chamaras, the silver-handled whisks, in their hands.

Immediately behind Yudhishtira's chariot, rides Dhritarashtra's only surviving son: Yuyutsu, who was always loyal to the Pandavas. Krishna and Satyaki follow Yuyutsu in the Jaitra, with Daruka at the chariot-head. Behind them come the women of the entourage, Kunti, Draupadi and the others, in golden palanquins. The irresistible joy of the occasion is upon them all and, for the moment, grief has melted from their hearts like darkness at sunrise. The long night ends today. It is indeed a new dawn in their lives, one bought dearly. Fate herself will not allow their minds to be shadowed with sorrow on this most auspicious day. The Pandavas arrive at the gates of Hastinapura and, despite themselves, a great sense of destiny overwhelms the five brothers in the chariot; even, perhaps, a feeling that everything they have suffered is worth this moment.

The people of Hastina have turned out in crowds to welcome their princes of light. The streets are thronged to bursting, all the way from the city-gates to the palace. Despite the incalculable tragedy of the war, a fresh new spirit sweeps the city of elephants. A stagnant darkness seems to have lifted away from the

ancient capital, overnight and despair banished. Hope springs green and exuberant in the hearts of the people and it seems the old ways of love will return to their lives, in triumph, with the sons of Pandu.

Earth and sky reverberate with Yudhishtira's name and the names of his brothers and Yuyutsu, of Krishna and Satyaki and the queen Draupadi. Though it has taken many years and a dreadful war, though blood has flowed on Kurukshetra: finally dharma has prevailed and the people rejoice. A sea of loving hands reaches out to the new king and his brothers and they are healed by that multitudinous touch.

The gates, the streets, are decked out in a season of garlands. All along Yudhishtira's progress, the sound of the Vedas hangs in the air, mingling with incense and the scents of flowers. It is a new spring come to the city and through avenues of white flags flapping in a celebrant breeze, the Pandavas are escorted to their palace with a thousand musicians, singers and dancers going before them. Truly, it is as if the earth blooms again in exhilaration, at the return of this king of dharma!

At the palace-gates, the brahmanas of Hastinapura receive Yudhishtira ceremonially with mantras and earthen lamps. Krishna leads his cousin into the sabha of the Kuru kings, where so many majestic sovereigns have been crowned, since time out of mind. Borne along by the tide of history and with the Dark One still leading him by the hand, Yudhishtira mounts the dais in that sabha and sits on the throne of his fathers, the throne covered in tiger-skins and called Sarvatobhadra. Now, Krishna's eyes shine with rare tears. He had sworn that one day his good cousin would ascend this throne of the earth. Today, he has kept his word. Dharma has prevailed and rules the world again; at least, for the time being.

Two glittering, jeweled seats face Yudhishtira's royal throne: places of honor, in which Krishna and Satyaki sit. Without them, the war could never have been won. There are two other golden thrones on either side of Yudhishtira. Here, Bheema and Arjuna sit. Beside them, are two beautiful ivory thrones; in one, Nakula sits and Kunti shares the second with her favorite child, Sahadeva. Draupadi is led in, solemnly and takes her place beside Yudhishtira. No memory touches her mind, today, of the time when she was last in this sabha. Dhritarashtra and Gandhari are there as well, in thrones of their own, with Vidura and Yuyutsu beside them.

Krishna calls for the sacred water, fetched from the holiest tirthas in Bharatavarsha. He fills his sea-conch, the Panchajanya, with that water and

pours it over Yudhishtira with his own hands, in abhisekha. That done, Krishna takes the golden Kuru crown, glimmering with jewels given by the Devas—the crown Pururavas once wore and all the Paurava kings after him—and sets the hallowed thing on Yudhishtira’s head. As Krishna marks his cousin’s brow with the vermilion rajatilaka, cries of ‘Yudhishtira Chakravarti! Jaya! Jaya!’ ring out through that court. These cries are picked up by the oceanic crowd outside and the entire city resounds with the king’s name and soon, with his brothers’ names and his incarnate cousin’s.

The people’s chosen representatives approach the throne and greet Yudhishtira formally on his coronation. He thanks them, saying, “My friends, I am moved by the love with which all of you have blessed my brothers and me. I will do everything in my power to justify the faith you place in me and be a king of dharma to you. My uncle Dhritarashtra has been king all these years and I pray he will continue to be head of the Kuru household, while I serve him as best as I can with the help of my brothers.”

Yudhishtira gives away a thousand gold coins, each, to the brahmanas who performed the Vedic rituals at his coronation. Then, in court, he appoints his brothers to their various tasks. The king has more holy water fetched and pours it over Bheema, making him yuvaraja. Vidura is appointed the king’s Prime Minister and has charge of the defense of the realm. He will also be the king’s personal counselor. Sanjaya is given charge of the treasury and the finances of the land. Arjuna is named Senapati of the army, while Nakula is given charge of its recruitment and maintenance. Arjuna also has charge of relations with other kings and their kingdoms. Dhaumya retains his position as chief priest and guru to the king and his brothers. Yuyutsu is to administer the provinces of the kingdom and to see to the needs of his father Dhritarashtra. Finally, Yudhishtira turns to his youngest brother, Sahadeva, waiting patiently to be given his charge. Yudhishtira says, “And you, Sahadeva, shall be my protector. You will be at my side at all times.”

A radiant Krishna watches his cousin assume crisp control¹. Later, that evening, last rites for those that died in the war are performed in the palace: grave rituals. When they are over, Yudhishtira and his brothers come to Krishna, who has gone to Arjuna’s palace, even like a tiger entering his cave. Before all the people, Yudhishtira folds his hands to the Avatara and says, “My Lord, you have given me back my fathers’ kingdom. You shared our sorrow during the years of our exile and without you, we would never have won the war. Every time we faced a crisis, or an obstacle that seemed insurmountable, you showed us the way ahead.” His voice chokes. “Lord, for our sake, you who are the

eternal Brahman assumed this human form. You were Arjuna's sarathy during the war. I have only my bhakti to offer you, Krishna. This is just the beginning of our need for you. I beg you, remain with us always."

Yudhishtira, emperor of the world, washes Krishna's feet and sprinkles his own head with the water. He prostrates himself before the Avatara. Smiling, Krishna raises him up and then, one by one, the other Pandavas, as they also worship him with sasthanga namaskara, the prostration of eight limbs.

THREE

THE DYING PATRIARCH

The next morning, with the sun, Yudhishtira comes to Krishna's apartment. He finds his cousin pensive. The Pandava says, "Did you have a restful night, my Lord? But you seem disturbed, Krishna, are you unwell?"

Krishna smiles at him and shakes his head. He makes no reply immediately. Then, slowly, he says, "I was thinking of your Pitama Bheeshma. He will not live much longer, Yudhishtira and I hear him calling me. When Bheeshma dies, all his wisdom will vanish with him. We must go to him before that happens. You must learn whatever he has to teach you about your dharma as a king. Bheeshma's wisdom is a priceless treasure. He must share it with you before he leaves us."

Yudhishtira says, "Let us go at once, Krishna, together."

Satyaki comes in just then. Krishna says to him, "Tell Daruka to prepare my chariot and you prepare to ride with us. We are going to Kurukshetra to see Bheeshma."

They set out, Yudhishtira and his brothers, Satyaki and Krishna. Kurukshetra lies bare before them, now that its corpses have been removed and burned. It is difficult to believe, just days ago, the greatest of all wars was fought here. At the edge of the fateful field, like another sun setting over the earth, Bheeshma lies dying.

Krishna and the Pandavas alight from their chariots and make their way to the patriarch on his bed of arrows. Many mysterious munis, whom none of them has ever seen before, sit around Bheeshma, some silently in dhyana, others softly chanting arcane mantras that have all but passed out of the world. Krishna approaches the Kuru grandsire first and kneeling beside him, takes his hand. Bheeshma's eyes flicker open; they are sea-like and full of pain. He sees Krishna at his side and Bheeshma's eyes flare with light, his face is lit by a smile.

Krishna says, also smiling, "Oh, my lord, how do you bear such pain? Why, if a needle pricks me, I cannot stand it! Here you are with a hundred arrows lodged in your body and you have been lying on them for so long. There is no one like you in all the world, no one with such a mighty will, Devavrata. Not just a will, Bheeshma, but wisdom also. Brihaspati, Sukra, Vasishta and Markandeya were your gurus and you have always walked the way of dharma. Never in time

has a greater man lived on this earth and none ever shall.

Your grandson Yudhishtira has been crowned king in Hastinapura; he has come to see you with his brothers. Now, more than ever, Yudhishtira has need of your wisdom. He is shaken by all the killing and dying he saw on Kurukshetra. He is full of sorrow and needs you to comfort him. It is just fifty-six days until uttarayana. When you die, all your wisdom will disappear from the world forever, unless you leave something of what you know with Yudhishtira. Your grandsons have come to you: tell them what you know about dharma, artha and yoga.”

Again, the smile touches Bheeshma’s face. With an effort, he begins to speak, “You are the Para-matman who pervades this universe: you tell me what I should do. I do not know how much longer I will live. This pain has robbed me of the count of time. I have discharged my debt to Satyawati. I can die in peace now. I am only waiting for Surya’s chariot to change its course in the sky.”

He pauses; then, another light is in his eyes. He takes Krishna’s hand and says, “My Lord, I want to see your Viswarupa before I die. Won’t you show yourself to me?”

“At the end of fifty-six days, when you leave your body, I will be at your side. But first, you have one final task left: you must pass your wisdom on to Yudhishtira.”

Bheeshma laughs. “Krishna, you mock me! How can I speak of dharma, artha or yoga when you are here with us: you who are the beginning and the end of all knowledge? Dare a sishya hold forth in his guru’s presence? And then, these arrows fill me with agony. I can hardly speak.”

“You are too modest, Bheeshma,” says Krishna. “You must teach Yudhishtira everything you know.”

“But I am so weak. I can hardly bear the pain I am in; to speak at any length would be impossible. Besides, my memory has faded and you want me to remember what I learnt when I was a boy. Forgive me, Krishna, but I don’t have the strength for this final task.”

The Avatara’s body shines. He speaks as softly as before, but there is unearthly authority in his voice. Krishna says, “I grant you a boon: from this moment, until you die, you will feel no pain. Your memory will be as clear as the heart of a rishi. Your mind will be sharp as a sword, Bheeshma, to sever any knot that binds Yudhishtira’s heart.”

It is told the sky showered down a petal-rain on Krishna and Bheeshma. A

wave of relief floods Bheeshma, as all his pain vanishes. Krishna squeezes the Kuru ancient's hand and then he rises, saying, "We will leave you to collect your thoughts. But we will return early tomorrow to hear your wisdom."

That night is the first restful one Krishna has spent in a long time. He sleeps deeply, a dreamless slumber. Early next morning, he sends Satyaki to Yudhishtira. Soon, they are ready to set out again for Kurukshetra. An hour after dawn, the Pandavas and Krishna arrive on the field. Bheeshma lies on it like the rising sun. He has not felt a twinge of pain since Krishna blessed him and he too has spent a restful night.

Bheeshma feels detached from his body, free to range through the labyrinths of his days. The past is clear before him in all its fabulous richness; the book of his life is his to read from at will. Indeed, most of the night Bheeshma has leafed through that marvelous tome as he pleased. There is so much he sees plainly now, which was obscured before. Devavrata sees his life for the miracle it has been, every symphonious moment.

Bheeshma welcomes Krishna in a stronger voice. Yudhishtira and his brothers still linger in the background. Narada, who is at Bheeshma's side, says, "Let Yudhishtira ask whatever he has to quickly. Time flits by and Bheeshma will not live long."

Before Krishna can call Yudhishtira closer, Bheeshma says, "Krishna, I am free of pain and my mind is keen and clear. I think I can answer any questions Yudhishtira has for me. But there is something I want to know. You can teach the dharma better than I can. Why have you chosen to entrust this task to me?"

Gently Krishna says, "Perhaps you are right, Bheeshma and I can tell Yudhishtira what he needs to know. But I thought, let Bheeshma's name be a legend forever in the world. Let men hear his wisdom and count it as being equal to the Vedas. What you say to your grandson shall be immortal and men will live their lives by it. A man is said to live in the world for as long as his fame does. You are the greatest man ever to grace the earth and I want your spirit to be with humankind forever. So, I ask you to teach the dharma to Yudhishtira and his brothers."

Tears start down Bheeshma's face, as he listens to the Avatara and feels his love upon him. Bheeshma is speechless for that stupendous love. At last, slowly, the Kuru patriarch says, "Let Yudhishtira ask me whatever he wants. I will be happy to tell him anything I know."

"Yudhishtira is afraid to approach you. He thinks you might blame him for

what happened during the war.”

Bheeshma raises his voice and calls Yudhishtira. When the Pandava comes hesitantly and kneels at his side, Bheeshma lays both his hands on his head, blessing him. Laughing, the patriarch says, “Why should you be afraid to come to your Pitama? I know your noble heart; I blame you for nothing. My child, every kshatriya’s dharma is to fight and kill his enemies, whoever they may be. You have only followed your dharma; why should you feel guilty? Call your brothers also and ask me whatever you want. I learnt what I know from unworldly masters, long ago. And I will tell you everything I learnt: by the grace of this immortal one who has come among us and is pleased to call himself Krishna.”

FOUR

BHEESHMA'S WISDOM1

The Kuru sovereign Yudhishtira says to his grandsire Bheeshma, lying on his bed of arrows, “I have heard that a king’s is the highest dharma. Pitama, I would learn my dharma from you.”

Bheeshma says, “A king’s first dharma is to worship the Gods and to honor brahmanas who are illumined men. But he himself should always be a karma yogin, a man of deeds. There are those that say destiny is all-important in a king’s life. Karma comes first, Yudhishtira. Destiny is important, but his own actions shape a king’s destiny. Indeed, I would even say a king’s deeds are more powerful than destiny.

The king’s second dharma is to be truthful. If you are a man of truth, your subjects will honor you, trust you. A king must be above reproach. He must be restrained, humble and righteous. He must be a master of his passions.

Justice must be like breathing to him: it must come naturally. As for his weaknesses, he must know how to conceal them, to be perfectly secretive about them. He must know his enemies’ weaknesses and hardly let them know he does. A king’s plans must be opaque, known only to himself and, perhaps, one or two counselors whom he trusts.

A king’s demeanor should be unafraid and straightforward. He must not be too mild. He will be disregarded if he is and his subjects will have no respect for him. That does not mean he should be harsh or tyrannical and that his people should be unduly frightened of him.

Most of all, a king must know how to choose those who serve him. He should be a judge of men and know whom he can trust and who are dangerous. Compassion must be part of the good king, but never weakness. If he is weak, the lowest men will take advantage of him.

Vigilance is integral to a king’s every moment. He must always be alert and study both his friends and his enemies. Above all, he must remember his first duty is toward his subjects. He must nurture them as a mother does the child in her womb. His dharma is never to please himself at his people’s expense. As a mother is with her child, a king should be with his people: their welfare should be his only concern.

A king must be the loneliest man in the land. He must not share his inmost

thoughts with anyone, not his closest advisors. He must be adept at dealing with the stronger enemy, the equal and the weaker one. He must know how to employ spies and sow dissension in his enemy's city, to divide those that serve his enemy. He should know how to bribe his enemy's soldiers and officials, make them betray their master.

A king should speak pleasantly at all times. He should surround himself with those that are as noble as he is, whose natures and thoughts concur with his own. Indeed, the only difference between himself and those that serve him should be the crown on his head.

The noblest king is the one in whose country the subjects are like children in their father's house. They are contented, because it is their own home they are living in. There is no deceit or pretence among them, no envy or dishonesty.

The essence of a king's dharma is to secure his subjects' prosperity, their happiness. There is no harder task on earth and he must use varied methods to achieve his ends. Most important are the men he appoints to positions of power. They must be honest and sincere men, yet he should never trust them entirely. The treasury must always be full, for the king's power stems from his wealth, as well. He must always have a powerful army to protect his kingdom, for that, too, is the secret of his strength. He must be a master of creating discord in his enemies' kingdoms, because therein also lies his strength. He should be wary and always on his guard against his enemy, who would do the same to him: create dissension within his country, his very court.

The king is the justice in the land. He is the one who metes out punishment to wrongdoers and protects the righteous. He should be honest; but he must know the ways of the world, how to fight fire with fire. He can never afford to be a simpleton. And yet, the world must never see him as being other than candid and straightforward."

Thus, Bheeshma of the Kurus discourses on the dharma of a king to Yudhishtira. He dwells on the many nuances and secrets of kingship and they soon find the day has flown by and the sun is sinking in the west. Yudhishtira takes his Pitama's hand and says, "You must rest now. I will return, first thing in the morning. There is so much I have to ask you still."

Bheeshma lays his palm on Yudhishtira's head. He shuts his eyes and peace steals over him. He falls into a deep, healing sleep.

The next morning, Yudhishtira and his brothers arrive with the sun. Yudhishtira has a question for his grandsire. "Pitama, how does a king come to

be called Rajan? He is just a man like all other men. He is subject to joy and grief. His mind and his senses are like those of other men. He lives for as long as other men do. Among his subjects, are men that are his superiors in intellect, in wisdom and courage. Yet, the king rules all the others. Why is one man elevated to being a Rajan, Pitama?”

Bheeshma says, “Long ago, in the first ages of krita and treta, there were no kings or kingdoms. The world was one and all men lived as one, in love, sharing the plenitude of the earth. The pristine spaces of nature were man’s inheritance and he was fulfilled in them, he rejoiced in them. All men were like brothers; they cared for one another as parts of themselves.

As time advanced, evil crept into the hearts of men. Covetousness was the first darkness to cloud the light of men’s minds: they became greedy and wanted possessions. Ancient man was free of such possessiveness; he knew his natural place in the order of things and exulted in time and its subtle fruit of wisdom and delight.

The first step toward darkness was covetousness, but lust was not far behind. Lust never hunts alone; wrath arrived with it. The age grew dark and anarchy and confusion swept the world. The original Veda vanished from the lips and the minds of men; dharma vanished with the Veda. The guardians of the world, the Devas, took panic and came trembling before their sire Brahma in his sabha.

Indra cried, ‘Lord, the world you created is plunging toward destruction. You must save it.’

It was then that Brahma composed the Neeti Shastra, an interminable treatise on conduct. It contained a hundred thousand edicts. So far, men had been pure and had needed no more than their untainted natures to be their guru. Now they were corrupted, their hearts had grown dark; they had need of a law outside themselves. When there is a law, someone must enforce that law. For the first time, men were divided into rulers and the ruled.

The Neeti Shastra dealt with the four concerns of human life: dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Brahma dwelt on these, at length. An important part of the Neeti Shastra dealt with crime and its punishment: what constituted a crime and how each crime should be punished. There were two kinds of punishment the Shastra dealt with, the open and the secret punishment. It dealt, for the first time, with traders and trade and the conservation of wealth. It dealt with rishis and tapasya. It spoke of thieves and other criminals and how they should be treated.

Another section of the Neeti Shastra dwelt on religious observances and rituals and the conduct of the various officials in the kingdom: of counselors, spies, ambassadors and the method of conciliation.

Brahma composed that Shastra in a mere moment and he said, 'Let this be called the Dandaneeti, the way of chastisement. There has never been crime or punishment before in the world. Now, there is already crime and let there be punishment as well.'

The treatise was studied and abridged by the great Gods, Siva being the first. Just before it was given to men, the wise Sukra saw it. He knew men's lives were short and most of them would hardly have the time to study such a voluminous Shastra. Sukra pared the original Dandaneeti down to its present form of a thousand essential edicts. Then, the Devas brought the tract to the Lord Vishnu who lies upon eternity's ocean of bliss. They said to him, 'Lord, show us a man on earth worthy of ruling all other men.'

Vishnu said to them, 'I will enter the body of one man. He and his sons shall be lords of the earth.'

A man called Vena was chosen to be king. From Vena's right arm, a son was born and he was as glorious as Indra. He was born wearing a coat of mail and with all the occult and earthly weapons. He was born knowing the Vedas and the Shastras, the art of war and of kingship and all the other arts, too. His name was Prithu and the rishis made him king of the world. Men said, in those days, that Prithu was the eighth son of Vishnu himself.

Prithu leveled the uneven earth. Vishnu and the Devas came down to witness the coronation of Prithu. Bhumidevi came as a Goddess bearing treasures of gold and jewels for king Prithu. Prithu asked her to be a cow and he milked her for the seven foods, which all living creatures would eat. Prithu was the lord not only of men, but also of the forests and the trees and the birds and beasts in them.

It was Prithu who first established dharma in the world and elevated it above all else. Prithu brought peace and righteousness back to the earth and because the people loved him, he was called Rajan: 'He who pleased all men'. Because he healed men's sick minds, he was also called Kshatriya; because the earth was pervaded by virtue during his reign, she was named Prithvi, after him.

Vishnu is said to have entered that first king's body and Prithu was blessed with divine intelligence, superior to any other man's. Thus, a king was created by the Gods themselves and was not to be trifled with. That was why he ruled

the world, but not the world him. And so, Yudhishtira, a king is called Rajan.”

Yudhishtira asks, “What is the dharma of the people?”

“Their first task is to choose a king and crown him. For his treasury, they must give up a fiftieth part of their livestock and gold and a tenth part of their grain. They should help him choose from among them men that are proficient at arms, so the kingdom can have an army. It is said a fourth part of the people’s punya, their virtue, accrues to their king and so, too, a fourth of their paapa, their sins.

Before their king, the people should be as a sishya before his guru, humble. A king whom his own subjects honor will naturally be feared by his enemies.”

“What are a king’s other duties, Pitama?”

“First of all, a king should subdue himself. Then it will be easy to subdue his enemies. There is no conquest as hard as that of his own five senses. Every king must wage a lifelong war against these.

A king must have an army to defend his kingdom and his people. He must be vigilant, because danger is always near. He must have spies who warn him of everything that goes on in his enemies’ kingdoms, why, in their very hearts. His spies must be the cleverest of his agents. They must seem like fools before whom an enemy will speak freely, without fear; or they must seem like men that are deaf and blind. In fact, they must be wise men, sharp and loyal, a king’s eyes and ears in his streets and in distant parts. His spies must be the hardest, most incorruptible men, strong and able to bear long privations: exile, cold, heat, violence and hunger. A king must have secret agents in his own court, that spy on his ministers, his friends, even on his sons. His spies should report only to the king himself. They must not know one another, or they will become too powerful.

The king, on whom his people rely, must never hesitate to be ruthless with his enemies. It must not be beneath him to use treachery, fire and poison against them. He should take a sixth of his people’s income for himself, as tithe, to maintain his army for their protection. His people are a king’s children, but he must not be overly compassionate when punishing the criminals among them, or he will lose respect.

Honest men, who are perfectly trustworthy, must be appointed to administer justice in the kingdom. If they are corrupt, the nation becomes weak. The old adage is so true, Yudhishtira: that the king makes the age; and not the other way, that the age makes the king.

Yet, the four yugas have their different natures and gifts to bestow on the earth. The age when the kings of the world rule entirely by the Neeti Shastra is called the satya or the krita yuga. Dharma prevails perfectly in this yuga and evil is unknown. It is an age when there is hardly any need for a king. The earth yields food without being tilled or sown and life-giving herbs and sacred plants, which cure every disease, grow abundantly. Sickness hardly exists during the halcyon krita and men live long lives. Every season is full of delight and peace and harmony suffuse the earth and its rulers reign immaculately by the Dandaneeti.

Then, comes an age when the king rules with three parts of dharma and one of darkness. This is the treta yuga. The earth no longer yields food on her own, but waits to be tilled. The third yuga is the dwapara and its sovereigns employ a half part of dharma to rule and the other half adharma, evil. The earth gives only half of what she can and the foods she yields are only half as nourishing as they once were. The herbs of healing, also, have lost their power by half and men too have lost half their dignity, strength and splendor.

In the last age, the kali yuga, the kings of the earth oppress their own people. Adharma is the rule of the day and hardly a fourth of the Dandaneeti is used. The earth is governed by anarchy and violence. All kinds of diseases sweep the world and men live short, harsh lives. The men of this yuga are diminished in every respect; indeed, they are hardly men in the sense that men of old were. They are creatures of darkness, their hearts ruined by greed, lust, malice and envy. The clouds do not bring the rain in season; drought and famine have their way with the world.

These are the yugas, Yudhishtira and the king is said to cause them.”

“Pitama, the king is the lord of wealth. Whose wealth does he own?”

“The Vedas say that the wealth of all men, except brahmanas, belongs to the king. It is the king’s dharma to support the holy ones, who bless the kingdom.”

The Pandava asked, “No king can accomplish even the smallest task by himself, but he needs his ministers. What are the traits and the dharma of the king’s ministers? What kind of men are worthy of being ministers?”

Bheeshma says, “A king is usually surrounded by four kinds of men. The first kind is the one whose opinion is always the same as his own, dharma or not. The second kind is the man who is sincerely devoted to his sovereign. The third is related by blood; and the fourth may be those who began as enemies, but have been won over with gifts.

There is also a fifth man, who serves only dharma. This fifth kind is rigid and a king should exercise caution while confiding in him. A king has to rule not only with dharma, but with adharma, too; and the fifth kind of friend or minister will censure him whenever he uses the dark ways. He might even betray him.

Most important is choosing the ministers with whom a king will surround himself. When power and position are involved, no man can be trusted entirely. A dishonest man can appear honest and an honest man, a villain. Power also changes men. A man who was scrupulously honest can be corrupted by power and become dishonest. Thus, no one must be trusted implicitly. Yet, a king cannot be unduly suspicious either. He must blend trust with mistrust, judiciously. He should use one minister to spy on another.

But of all those close to him, a king should fear his own blood like death. A kinsman always considers himself the king's equal or his superior and he is more envious than anyone else. His own kinsman cannot bear to see a king prosper." A wry smile twitches at the Kuru patriarch's lips. He says, "But you know all about that, Yudhishtira. Yet, a king needs his kinsmen more than anyone else. With them, also, he must behave as if he trusts them completely, but in truth he must always be watchful."

Yudhishtira asks, "What kind of men should be made legislators? What qualities should the ministers of war have? Which men should be a king's courtiers and which ones his counselors?"

"The legislators should be modest, restrained men; they must be honest and sincere and have the courage of truth with them at all times. The ministers for war must be men who are close to the king, ever at his side. Most of all, they must be brave men and kshatriyas. They must be learned, too and their only fault should be their excessive love for their master. A courtier should be from the noblest lineage and the king must always treat him with honor. He, also, must be one who is always loyal, a man who never abandons his sovereign, whatever the circumstances.

The officers of the army must be from noble stock and born in the king's own country. Let them be handsome, learned and powerful men, so they inspire loyalty and devotion in their soldiers. They must be of impeccable conduct and, above everything else, loyal.

As counselors a king must have four brahmanas, learned in the Vedas, all of them snatakas and dignified past reproach. He must have eight kshatriyas, strong men and proficient warriors. He must have twenty-one vaishyas, all wealthy, three sudras, pure, humble and intelligent and one suta. Remember that these

counselors must all be above fifty years of age.

Among a king's main tasks is to punish those that commit crimes in his land. The wealthy criminal should have his riches or property taken from him, while the poor criminal should be imprisoned. Corporal punishment may be used to check the more hardened law-breakers.

A good king levies taxes as a bee gathers pollen from flowers: gently, without injuring his people. He is like a tigress who grips her cubs firmly in her teeth, but never hurts them."

Bheeshma imparts his treasure of wisdom to Yudhishtira over many days. There is much he shares that has not been recorded: for, at times, he speaks in secret. At dusk, the Pandavas go back to Hasti-napura and they return each morning with the sun.

Once, Yudhishtira asks, "Pitama, tell me again how a king should conduct himself."

"Dharma must be his very life, for there is nothing greater than dharma in the world. Dharma makes one king better than another; and, with dharma, a king can conquer the earth. Remember his ministers must be men of dharma, as well, as pure as he is; and their truth should radiate, by word and by deed, throughout the land. Malice has no place in a king's heart. His senses must be perfectly subdued. He must love his people as a father does his children and he should use his intelligence without passion. Then, his reign will be glorious and his greatness swell like a sea fed by a thousand rivers."

Yudhishtira says, "The way of dharma is long, it is said to have a hundred branches. Which are the main duties to be followed?"

"First of all, the mother, the father and the guru must be worshipped and what they command must be obeyed without question. Serving his father helps a man cross the sea of samsara, serving his mother raises him up into Devaloka and serving the guru bestows the realm of Brahma on a sishya."

"Tell me about dharma, artha and kama, Pitama. Which of them helps take one's life in the right direction?"

"The three exist together; they are indivisible when a man creates artha, wealth, for himself, always treading the path of dharma. Wealth is rooted in virtue and kama, pleasure, is the fruit of wealth. All these come to be by the effort of a man's will. In this world, there are objects created for the gratification of the senses and the acquisition of these is the will's concern.

When a man is unattached to the objects of pleasure, he is liberated. One needs virtue, punya, to protect the body. One requires wealth to be virtuous. However, dharma, artha and kama must never be pursued just for themselves, but always as a means to knowledge: the knowledge of the Self. Virtue must be acquired not for pleasure, but to purify the soul. Wealth must be acquired so it can be spent with perfect relinquishment and pleasure must be pursued not to gratify the body but only to support it.

Thus, dharma, artha and kama are founded in the will and all three are necessary means to an end. The end is moksha, the final goal, the only one. As a man approaches moksha, he must abandon dharma, artha and kama by tapasya, ascetic penance.”

FIVE

DHARMA

Another time, Yudhishtira asks, “They say intelligence is superior to everything else. Intelligence helps a man plan for the future, to provide for it; with intelligence, a man meets every emergency. Pitama, tell me about intelligence and how it used. Especially when a king is beset by many enemies, how does he protect himself with intelligence?”

“When a king is in distress, he often finds that a friend becomes a foe and an enemy a friend. There are times when fate makes everything uncertain and a king hardly knows what to do. There are times when an enemy must be befriended and times when a friend must be treated as an enemy. What a king does depends on the times and the king who does not hesitate to do what the time demands seldom fails. While a king who is unbending, seldom succeeds.

Of course, a man must be investigated thoroughly, before he is accepted as a friend. Enemies must be studied even more carefully, their every strength and weakness examined. In this life, which is a play of masks, often friends appear in the guise of foes and foes disguised as friends. The terms friend and enemy are relative: when a man suits one’s interests, he is a friend; when he opposes them, he is an enemy. If a man serves one’s purpose as long as he lives, he is a lifelong friend. Ultimately, friendship and enmity are matters of self-interest.

Selfishness is the most powerful impulse in every man: the world turns on this pivot. No man is precious to another unless he stands to gain by him. Of course, men’s needs are varied and one man is popular because he is liberal-minded, another because he is sweet-tongued and a third because he is religious. Like-minded people generally become friends, until time changes their affections. It is the rule and not the exception that friendships last as long as they serve some purpose. As soon as the reason for the friendship ends, so does the friendship itself.

An intelligent man knows when to make peace with an enemy. When two enemies become friends, it is obvious that each one only bides his time until he can get the better of the other. And it is invariably true that the wiser and the more patient of the two is the one that succeeds. Until the proper opportunity presents itself, you must pretend there is no one dearer to you than your enemy, no one you trust as much. When the time comes, never hesitate to wage war! Yudhishtira, this policy applies not only with enemies, but friends as well.”

Another day, Yudhishtira asks, “Pitama, what is the font of sin? From where does evil spring?”

“Greed is the single root of evil. Greed destroys dharma and punya. From this single spring the river of sin flows. When a man covets, he becomes full of hypocrisy and cunning. Anger and lust come from covetousness and so do a hundred other sicknesses of the mind. The loss of judgement comes from it, deception, arrogance, malice, vindictiveness, shamelessness, the loss of virtue, anxiety and infamy all spring from covetousness. These are not all. Miserliness, cupidity, arrogance of birth, arrogance of learning, of beauty, of wealth, every impropriety, harshness of speech, speaking ill of others, ruthlessness, malevolence, insincerity, gluttony, a love of lies, indeed, a love of every kind of sin: all sprout from the root of covetousness. My son, no man in this world has been able to relinquish greed. Life on earth may decay, men may diminish in numbers and stature; but the power of greed will never fade. Even the greatest men, those of deep learning, whose minds are a treasury of the scriptures, those who are so able at advising others: these are found wanting when it comes to managing their own lives. Greed nestles in their hearts and makes them weak and cowardly, its slaves.”

“Tell me about ignorance, Pitama,” says Yudhishtira.

“Ignorance, too, springs from the same covetousness. As greed grows, so does ignorance and the mind becomes dark and hardly sees clearly any more.”

Yudhishtira is thoughtful, then asks, “What are the first duties of a king, which must have precedence over the rest?”

“Restraint is the quintessential dharma. Just as giving in to his greed leads a man to every sin, restraining himself leads him to glory. From restraint come the virtues of compassion, forgiveness, patience, mercy, impartiality, truth, sincerity, humility, modesty, steadiness, tolerance and liberality, serenity, contentment, sweetness of speech, benevolence and a heart free of malice. A restrained man will never be a slave to the attachments of this world, nor to his greed. Once he learns to restrain himself, he is already upon the threshold of moksha.”

“Tell me about the truth, my lord, if you are not tired.”

Bheeshma smiles. “All my pain and tiredness left me, when Krishna blessed me. Truth is the dharma not just of kings, but every human being. Truth is the eternal dharma; it is the final sanctuary, the last tapasya. Truth is the highest yoga; why, it is the immortal Brahman. There is no yagna as profound as truth: the three worlds are founded in truth and nothing else.

There are many aspects to truth, Yudhishtira. Impartiality, self-control, forgiveness, modesty, endurance, goodness, renunciation, contemplation, dignity, fortitude, compassion and non-violence are some. But the Truth itself is single, eternal, immutable.”

“What must a man strive for in his life?”

“All the living are in death’s shadow. The nights come and go, but every moment death draws nearer. Death waits for no man; it frequently arrives before a man’s desires in this life have been fulfilled. Even when a man is plucking flowers in his garden, death snatches him away, like a tiger a ram. So, my child, avoid procrastination in your life. Finish today what you had planned to do tomorrow. Do in the morning what you had left for the afternoon. Time is always shorter than we believe and a man must acquire virtue as quickly as he can. Thus, one must be ready for death: for he comes at his whim, without notice. Only virtue bestows fame in this world and the next.

On earth, man is plagued by a thousand desires, endlessly. He grows attached to possessions and people; he grows attached to places and houses. His work, his home, his lands, his wife and children all weave a subtle web of bondage. Death brutally tears every thread. Nothing but truth can resist the web of attachment. When a man realizes how ephemeral this world is, he sees the truth; then death holds no fear for him. For, the fear of death springs from attachment. In every man, there are the seeds of death and the seeds of freedom. It is left to each man which seeds he chooses to nurture. It always seems the seeds of attachment are easier to nourish. But the truth of time is otherwise.

Thus the wise man restrains his senses; he rises above desire and anger. He learns how to treat pleasure and pain alike. Serenity comes to him and, then, nirvana. What he thinks and what he says, what he does: all his life is founded in Brahman and such a man does not die, but is born to eternal life.

There is no vision like knowledge and truth is the greatest tapasya. Attachment is the most terrible sorrow and relinquishment the only, deepest joy. Yudhishtira, we are born from Brahman, the eternal current; by Brahman, we are born. If we devote ourselves to that supreme Spirit, we can return to Brahman. My son, always seek the self hidden in the deepest cave of the heart.”

Yudhishtira asks, “Which is the man whom all the world loves? Who is he that is perfectly accomplished?”

“He will be learned, good and wise. He is never so proud that he will lose his composure from arrogance. He is contented and serene. His senses do not

lead him astray and he is always possessed of the peace that comes from knowing the supreme truth.”

“Why does a man become a sinner or virtuous? How does he achieve relinquishment and liberation?”

“It is desire that makes a man sin, when he grows so attached to the objects of the senses that he will do anything to gain them. With attachment, the mind becomes clouded and a man abandons the path of virtue. When he is no longer virtuous, he pretends to be so and becomes a hypocrite. The acquisition of wealth by hypocrisy is not difficult and the man plunges down the way of sin. He does not listen any longer to the advice of elders and wise men; and soon there is hardly any hope of Salvation for him.

The man of dharma always seeks the welfare of others. He is sage and knows how to avoid the pitfalls of the senses, how not to let them rule him. He knows the difference between brief, empty pleasure and true joy. A man is virtuous when he is a master of his senses. But just this does not give him freedom; he must practise renunciation, so desire itself leaves him, slowly. At the final stage, knowing this world is merely a passing pageant in death’s halls, the virtuous man casts off his very virtue and its rewards: heaven and happiness. He sets out to seek moksha, the unchanging condition.”

“What are the qualities a man needs to be free from attachment, to achieve moksha?”

“The man who is near moksha has passed beyond the senses and their world. Hunger and thirst do not approach him; his body makes no demands. His mind has grown far beyond anger, greed and sin. He never forgets himself, the truth that is within him. A bamboo hut and a king’s palace are the same to such a man. Pain and pleasure do not touch him, he knows both are conceived in delusion. He sees the world clearly, as only the coming together of the five elements. Pain, pleasure, loss, gain, defeat and victory are all the same to him. Fear and anxiety lay no claim on his heart. He knows that a thousand kings of majesty have lived briefly and then passed on from the earth; he knows the evanescence of life. He has learnt the truth that all things in the world are fleeting, insubstantial. With such wisdom he attains moksha, be it in the jungle or in his home.”

The spiritually inclined Yudhishtira is intrigued. He asks, “How can a man attain moksha without leaving his home and its bonds and going into the forest?”

Bheeshma says, “A king need not abandon his kingdom to attain nirvana;

only, he must not be attached to his throne. So, too, with everything else in life, your wife, children, work or wealth. If you can turn your mind away from all these to the eternal Brahman, you will find Salvation. Your state of mind is what is important, not where you are. Knowledge comes from relinquishment and yoga, which is union, comes after knowledge. If his spirit is enlightened, it does not matter if a man lives in his home or in the forest. He is a sannyasin.”

Yet another day, Yudhishtira asks, “Where is the Devi of prosperity to be found?”

“She dwells in the eloquent man, the active man, the attentive man. If a man is high-minded, free of anger and has his passions under control, prosperity comes to him. A man of little energy does not find the Goddess of prosperity, nor does he who is full of anger, or he who is diffident. She lives with brahmanas who are devoted to studying the Vedas, kshatriyas who are men of dharma, vaishyas who are absorbed in their trade and sudras who are bhaktas.”

“What should be the dharma of a man who wants to pass pleasantly through this world and have heaven in the next?”

“There are three sins of deed such a man must avoid: killing, thieving and adultery. He must avoid four sins of speech: evil talk, harsh words, lies and speaking ill of others. He must resist three sins of the mind: coveting what belongs to someone else, injuring another in his heart and disbelief in the scriptures. If a man can avoid these ten sins, he passes safely through this world and finds swarga for himself.”

“Is there any virtue superior to brahmacharya? What is the highest punya, grandfather, which is the greatest purity?”

“Abstinence from wine and meat is superior to celibacy. Indeed, you can hardly aspire to being a brahmachari if you cannot first control what you eat and drink. Dharma is the highest punya, it is also the greatest purity.”

“Which are the times in life for dharma, artha and kama?”

“The first part of a man’s life is for earning wealth. Then, dharma must be followed and the enjoyment of kama comes after. Remember, one should not be attached to any of these, but always be reaching beyond them for moksha.”

Another time, Yudhishtira asks, “Which is the holiest tirtha?”

“All the tirthas can purify a man, for they are all blessed; but, my son, there is no tirtha like truth. The deepest, fathomless tirtha is the mind. It is in that tirtha one should bathe, for it is the most untainted of all holy waters. If a man

bathes in the Manasa sarovara called truth he becomes sincere and gentle, truthful, compassionate, restrained and tranquil.”

“Who is man’s truest friend? Is it his mother, his son, his guru or his companion? When a man dies, he abandons his body as if it were no more than a clod of earth. Who is the friend who follows a man into the next world?”

Bheeshma smiles, “Man is born alone, my child and so, too, he dies. Whether he knows it or not, he is quite alone all through this wondrous journey called life. Once you are dead, who stays with you? Your mother and father, children and guru, your friends and all the others turn away from your funeral pyre and return to their own lives. But, Yudhishtira, dharma follows you out of this world. Dharma stays with a man even after he is dead. At last, dharma is the only true friend.”

There is a lot else that Yudhishtira asks his Pitama and Bheeshma answers the Kuru king patiently, giving freely of his wisdom to the Pandava. At last, one evening, Yudhishtira asks his last questions. “In this world who is the one God in whom we may seek final refuge? Who is the God I can worship and have everything I want from him? Which is the one true religion that is above all others? Which is the mantra by which a man can free himself from the bonds of life and death?”

Bheeshma takes Yudhishtira’s hand. His face full of light, he says, “My son, Krishna is Lord of the universe. He is the God of Gods, who has come among us as a man. There is no one greater than him: among all the stars, in all the ages. He pervades the akhanda and if you meditate on him and his many names, you will pass beyond every sorrow.” Bheeshma smiles, “You ask me which the greatest religion is. It is Krishna. He is the highest tapasya, the final refuge and the holiest one. He is the beginning of creation and its end. Dark Krishna is the eternal Brahman. He is the Paramatman, Lord of the past, the present and the future. Surrender to him, Yudhishtira and you will find eternal bliss, the place beyond change.”

Bheeshma keeps Yudhishtira’s hand in his for some time and they are lost in a living silence, as the sun sets. Yudhishtira is content. Like cobwebs from his mind, his Pitama’s wisdom has brushed away his doubts and anxieties. His heart is full of faith again; the tiredness and despair of the war have all but left him.

Muni Vyasa arrives there. He says to Bheeshma, “You have restored Yudhishtira’s faith, why, he glows with it. And now, great one, your treasure of wisdom will remain in this world for a time more.”

Bheeshma lays his hand on the Pandava's head. "You have no more questions. Go back to your kingdom now and begin your reign; and let it be a just and prosperous one. I know your heart, Yudhishtira, your subjects will be as happy as the people of the earth were when Nahusha, Harishchandra and Yayati ruled them. Bless you, my son. Go now and live a joyful life. But when the sun turns north again, at uttarayana, come back to me. I must see you once more at that time, ah, the time I have waited for all this long life!"

Yudhishtira takes the dust from his Pitama's feet. He kisses his hands tenderly and walks away from him, as night falls. Full of new hope, the Pandavas return to Hastinapura. Slowly, the memories of the war begin to fade from their minds and they have sense of a new day dawning in their lives. Quiet joy is upon them, welling in their hearts.

On Kurukshetra, profound peace again enfolds Bheeshma upon his uncommon bed. His heart is as light as the air, soaring: at last, he knows he has no task left in this world to fulfil. Death draws near like an old friend.

SIX

THE PASSING OF A PATRIARCH

The days pass and the sun turns north. That morning of the solstice, Yudhishtira and his brothers return to Kurukshetra, where Bheeshma still lies. With them come Dhritarashtra and Krishna, Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, Satyaki, Vidura and Yuyutsu. They bring flowers, incense, silks, sandal-wood, jewels, rice grains and fruit. Bheeshma knows his time has finally arrived; he lies waiting. All Hastinapura follows its king to the field of fate.

Bheeshma lies with his eyes shut; Vyasa, Parasara, Narada and the munis from Devaloka surround him. Yudhishtira approaches the patriarch, takes his hand and says, “Pitama, it is I, Pandu’s son Yudhishtira. All of us have come, as you wanted. Dhritarashtra is here, my lord. Krishna is here; the people have come to pay homage to you. I beg you, open your eyes and look at them.”

For a moment, Bheeshma does not respond. Then slowly his eyes flutter open and they are far away, as if they already saw other worlds. Bheeshma sees a sea of people around him; a faint smile touches his lips. He says softly, but very clearly, “Yudhishtira, my son, I am happy to see you with our people. At last, Surya Deva has turned his chariot north again. I have lain here for some sixty days, more. I feel a hundred years have passed. Now, finally, it is time for me to leave this earth.”

Bheeshma turns his gaze to Dhritarashtra, “My son, you know the dharma of a king. Yes, you are wise, there is nothing you do not know. All that happened was by fate, none of it could be helped.

Don’t grieve over your sons who died. Pandu’s sons are with you, treat them as your own. Be fulfilled in them, be joyful with them.”

Bheeshma pauses, then, says to Yudhishtira, “Fetch me some flowers, child. I want to worship Krishna.”

The flowers come; Bheeshma worships Krishna, ritually and his eyes are so very bright. The Kuru ancient says fervently, “You are the Lord of the universe, you are the Creator of this earth. I beg you, Krishna, show me your Viswarupa and let me leave this world forever. Bless me that I find the highest sanctuary.

Though all the others see no change in Krishna, Bheeshma’s eyes see his Cosmic Form, infinite, ineffable. Krishna takes Bheeshma’s hand, he says, “Devavrata, return to your home on high. Go back to the Vasus and never again

shall you be born into this world of men. As for your death, why, you are like Markandeya: death waits for you, you can summon him when you want.”

Bheeshma’s face is lit by a brilliant smile and the people see a miracle before their eyes. Devavrata shuts his eyes and calls his death to him. The people of Hastinapura see Bheeshma’s body blaze with light and, limb by limb, from his feet up, the arrows that pierced him fall out and his wounds vanish. Then, the uncanny luster rises and leaves his body through the subtle opening on his skull. Scintillating, Bheeshma’s soul ascends into heaven.

The sky is full of music; a fine breeze blows, laden with the scents of a thousand flowers of Devaloka. The earth is cool and mild and the heart of every man and woman is full of the peace beyond understanding.

They make a pyre of sandalwood on Kurukshetra. Yudhishtira and Vidura wrap Bheeshma’s body in cerements of silk, they cover him with flowers. In a solemn procession, the Pandavas bring their Pitama on his final journey, while Yuyutsu holds the sovereign white parasol over him. They lift the Kuru patriarch on to the fragrant pyre, around him they lay the hundred arrows that brought him down. The brahmanas and munis all chant the Sama hymns and Dhritarashtra touches Devavrata’s pyre alight with a burning branch. Yudhishtira, his brothers, Vidura and Dhritarashtra stand to the right of the blazing sandalwood. All of them cry, as flames clasp the greatest man who ever lived, make ashes of his body.

Early the next morning, they collect Bheeshma’s remains, bones the fire spared and ashes and come to the Ganga. As they offer tarpana to the departed one, suddenly the river stops flowing! Ganga rises from her waters, lamenting.

She says to the other mourners, “My child is dead and there was no one like him in all the world. He was a devoted son. He was invincible; even Bhargava could not vanquish him. Today, you have come to float his ashes down my currents, for Shikhandi, who was not even a man, killed my child. Oh Devavrata, all my hopes for you have been proved vain. I thought you would be king of the earth and now look what is left to me.”

She sobs inconsolably, as the others watch in some awe. Then Krishna goes to her and says, “Don’t cry for your son, mother of the world. You know he was your child only briefly. You know who Bheeshma was before he was cursed to a mortal life. He was not merely a man and he could not be merely a king like one. He was not just a kshatriya; he could not be killed like one. The time of Bheeshma’s curse has ended and he has returned to his kingdom in Devaloka, where he sits on a loftier throne than any of this earth. Your son is a Deva and he

is with the Devas again. Rejoice, Mother Ganga, that at last your Devavrata is free.”

Shimmering Ganga bows gravely to Krishna. Her eyes still tear-laden, she vanishes. When they look at the golden river, they see that she flows again, as she has since the world began. Now, standing in the water after offering tarpana to his dead Pitama, Yudhishtira breaks down. Sobs shake him and he staggers out from the river with Bheema helping him.

Yudhishtira sits on the riverbank, covers his face in his hands and grief convulses him. His mood passes to his brothers and all of them sob like children, as wild remorse grips their hearts. Before the war began, Dhritarashtra had sent a message to Yudhishtira through Sanjaya. He had said Yudhishtira should abandon all thoughts of war, because, with his gentle nature, even if he won he would regret it ever after. The blind king had not been wrong.

As Yudhishtira sits crying like an orphan, Dhritarashtra comes to comfort him. The uncle raises his nephew up compassionately and enfolds him in an embrace.

Dhritarashtra says, “Come, my son, you cannot lose control of yourself. You are a king now; you have a kingdom to care for. Look at Gandhari and me, Yudhishtira. What is your loss compared to ours, what is your remorse compared to ours? All you did was dharma and you have not sinned. That is not true of us and we have lost a hundred sons. Come, my son, this is no time for tears, but for courage and fortitude.”

Krishna, also, comes and takes Yudhishtira’s hand. The Dark One says, “Yudhishtira, your Pitama taught you everything he knew before he left us. You are setting all that at nothing. What will your people do, if you give in to yourself like this?”

Yudhishtira controls himself and they return to Hastinapura.

BOOK FOURTEEN

ASWAMEDHA PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

KRISHNA SAYS FAREWELL

In Hastinapura, the Pandava takes up the reins of the chariot of the kingdom. Guilt still haunts him. He blames himself for the war and all the death it brought. Krishna, Vyasa and Narada pacify him. They speak to him at length and at least he has the everyday serenity to discharge his dharma as king. Dhritarashtra spends hours talking to his nephew and Vidura comforts him as well.

Now, that the war is over, Krishna and Arjuna take to spending their time with each other, as they used to in the old days. They go back to Indraprastha and rediscover the places where they first grew close. They wander the gardens of the city and spend hours, alone together, in the Mayaa sabha. They range the forest around Indraprastha, hunting, speaking of everything under the sun, of the war and, especially, the events that led to it¹.

It hardly seems a few days since they were last here, but in fact fifteen years have gone by. They ride out to the Khandava vana that they helped Agni burn. It was there that they first met Mayaa. The thread of time shimmers clear, its silver strands. Krishna asked Mayaa to build a sabha for Yudh-ishtira; and then the tide of fate swept them along, helplessly. Perhaps, it began even before that: when dark Panchali entered their lives. That was the very day Krishna first met his cousins, the Pan-davas.

They were given a wilderness for their patrimony and the Avatara raised Indraprastha in the desolation. Narada came and told Yudhishtira that Pandu was unhappy in Yama's halls. The Rajasuya followed and stoked Duryodhana's envy. Krishna killed Sishupala and everything else had come like a flash flood: the game of dice, Dusasana dragging Draupadi into the Kuru sabha, the swearing of the oaths of revenge and then exile.

Arjuna remembers how he went to Dwaraka to ask for Krishna's help. Duryodhana had been there, that day. Arjuna chose Krishna for his sarathy and that sealed the fate of the Kauravas. Then, the war to end all wars. Finally, Yudhishtira sat on the throne to which he was born.

One day, Krishna says to Arjuna, "The war is won, your enemies are dead and Yudhishtira sits where he belongs, on the throne of Hastinapura. I have served my purpose, Arjuna and I must return to Dwaraka. I have not seen my

mother and father and they must be anxious. I haven't the courage to ask Yudhishtira if I can leave. I beg you, ask him for me, Arjuna. If he agrees, I will go; if he says I must stay, I shall. What Yudhishtira wants is more important to me than what I want myself. But tell him I said he has his brothers with him to help him rule, he has the wise Vidura at his side. Arjuna, you must also let me go now."

Before he has finished, he sees tears in Arjuna's eyes. Krishna takes his cousin's hand. The Pandava can hardly bear to think of parting from his sarathy. The eighteen days of the war had been the most wonderful days of his life. Krishna had been with him every moment! Fear and triumph they had shared, sorrow and courage. During the war, they had been like one person: two bodies, but one spirit. Arjuna thinks he would not mind reliving his life, every day of it, just to be as near Krishna as he had during the war.

Arjuna cries, "You have served your purpose! How can you say that to me?"

Krishna smiles. "I only meant the war, Pandava. I know you need me still and I need you. I can hardly live without you, my friend. Don't you understand? You and I are not apart from each other. Half Krishna's soul is Arjuna!"

For the first time, Krishna tells Arjuna about the anxious night he spent before the day Jayadratha died. He tells him how he told Daruka to keep his chariot ready, because he would kill Jayadratha himself if Arjuna could not. Arjuna cries again to hear him. He clasps Krishna to him and they sit thus, in silence, for a long time. Then, softly, the Pandava says, "I will let you go back to Dwaraka, but only if you promise to return to us soon."

"How will I stay away for long?" replies Krishna.

The next day the two of them ride back to Hastinapura. They spend that evening with Dhritarashtra and Yudhishtira. In the morning, Arjuna and Krishna come to Yudhishtira's apartment. They sit chatting pleasantly of this and that, though Yudhishtira's face continues to show signs of a deep grief.

After a while, Arjuna says, "Krishna feels he must return to Dwaraka. He says his father will be waiting for him."

Sighing, Yudhishtira says, "Of course you must go back to see your father and mother. But oh, my Lord, how will we live without you?" Krishna only smiles. Yudhishtira wipes his tears, then, says, "Very well, I will let you go. But on one condition: that you come to me in Hastinapura, just as you used to in Indraprastha, as soon as I think of you. Whenever I needed you, Krishna, you

always came. Let that never change. Go now; go home to Vasudeva and Devaki. They must long to see you. So much has happened in our world since you were last with them.”

Krishna says, “I will be here whenever you need me, that will never change. One war has ended, Yudhishtira, but another, greater one is just beginning. You still have the war against yourself to win.”

The Avatara takes leave of his cousins. Satyaki bids the Pandavas farewell; after embracing his friend, Bheema stands in a daze, staring dully ahead of him. After everything they have been through together, at death’s very gates, parting is hard indeed. Krishna prostrates himself before Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, Kunti, Vidura, Yudhishtira and Bheema. He takes tender leave of Draupadi, Nakula and Sahadeva. Finally, he embraces Arjuna, quickly, then turns away and climbs into his chariot. Daruka flicks his reins over his horses and Krishna and Satyaki set out for home. The Pandavas stand gazing after the white chariot long after it has vanished from view.

When they have driven some way, Krishna lays a hand on his sarathy’s shoulder, “Come, Daruka, now fly!”

The horses flash across the ground, then rise steeply into the air and go the way of the wind: home to mysterious Dwaraka, jewel in the sea.

TWO

THE ASWAMEDHA YAGNA

The days pass and his kingdom prospers like the earth blooming in a sacred spring; but Yudhishtira still grieves. One day, Vyasa returns to Hastinapura. He finds the Pandava king dejected, wasting. Bheema and Arjuna tell the muni that remorse still torments their brother.

Vyasa says to Yudhishtira, “It seems all our advice has been in vain. You still mourn for what is past, which cannot be recalled or mended. Your brothers are distraught to see you like this, your mother is anxious for your health.”

Sadly, Yudhishtira says, “My lord, I cannot help myself, though I try.”

Before he came, Vyasa has already thought of a remedy for Yudhishtira. “There is a remedy prescribed of old that will help you subdue your sorrow. Undertake an Aswamedha yagna.”

Hope flickers in the Pandava’s eyes. He says, “The Aswamedha will purify the earth of the sins of war, but a king must have vast resources before he can even think of the yagna. The war has emptied our coffers. I cannot dream of performing an Aswamedha. Why, the commonest sacrifice would tax me sorely.”

“The Ikshvaku king of old, Marutta’s, treasure lies buried under the Himalaya. I know where the stone vault is and the trove is waiting to be unearthed by a needy king of the earth.”

“How was such a treasure hidden on the mountain?”

“Once, Marutta wanted to perform a profound yagna and approached Guru Brihaspati to be his priest. Brihaspati said, ‘I am the guru of the Devas of light, of Indra himself. How can I be the priest of a mere mortal king? Find someone else to be your ritvik.’

Marutta sought the counsel of some munis. No ordinary priest would suffice for the yagna he planned, he had need of a great brahmana. He was advised to seek the services of Brihaspati’s brother, Samvarta, who now lived in a forest on earth. Samvarta had left Devaloka because he could not bear his brother’s envy any more and Indra always took Brihaspati’s part against him. Marutta found Samvarta and begged him to be his priest. Samvarta said, ‘I will be your ritvik, Kshtariya. You must first worship Lord Siva. Only he can give you the wealth you will need for the yagna of yagnas that you plan.’

Marutta of the House of the Sun was a rajarishi. He sat in tapasya and Siva blessed him with a treasure like the world had never seen. Marutta and Samvarta decided to perform the yagna upon the Himalaya. A thousand craftsmen were commissioned to create the golden urns for the sacrifice and build a wonderful yagnashala on the mountain. When Brihaspati heard who Marutta's priest was to be, when he heard about the wealth with which Siva had blessed that king, he was livid with envy. He grew pale, thin and wasted day by day.

Indra asked him, 'My lord, what ails you? Don't your servants care for you well?'

Brihaspati said in a low voice, 'Marutta has begun his yagna with wealth won from Siva. Samvarta is his priest.'

'But you are my own priest, the Devaguru. How can Samvarta harm you?'

Grimly, his master replied, 'Who can bear to see an enemy prosper? Indra, you must do something to put out the fire in my heart!'

Indra sent messengers to Marutta's court, offering him Brihaspati's services as priest for his yagna. Marutta sent his reply to the Deva king, 'Samvarta shall be my ritvik.'

Furious Indra wanted to cast his Vajra at Marutta, but Samvarta prevented him with his tapasya shakti. Finally, Indra and the other Devas attended Marutta's yagna and, pacified by that king, gave him their blessing. When the sacrifice on the Himalaya was complete, Marutta gave away gold by the sack to the brahmanas who had come to chant the Vedas. Siva had been so generous that, even after this, a huge treasure was left over, gold and jewels to fill a storehouse. Marutta had this wealth sealed in a rock chamber on the mountain, in a secret place and he returned to his capital, Ayodhya."

As Vyasa speaks, Yudhishtira looks around at his brothers and sees how eager they are. Bheema will do anything to see his brother get over his sorrow and be enthused by something again. Arjuna, essential kshatriya, is always delighted at the prospect of a campaign. For, of course, Yudhishtira will send him to ride with the sacrificial horse of the Aswamedha, daring any king to arrest its career.

At last, a smile dawns on Yudhishtira's face. It is perhaps the first time he has smiled since the war ended. He says to Vyasa, "My lord, let us go to the Himalaya and uncover Marutta's treasure. We will perform an Aswamedha yagna."

Before anything else, Yudhishtira sends word to Krishna in Dwaraka,

informing him of their plans. He asks his cousin to come to Hastinapura with his Yadavas for the sacrifice. Suddenly, the eldest Pandava's disposition is transformed. Once more, he seems to look forward to something; there is a light in his eyes again. Vyasa smiles to himself, he knows the immediate reason for Yudhishtira's change of heart. The Kuru king loves no place on earth as he does the Himalayas, where he was born. There is no other place, which can comfort him and return peace to his troubled spirit like those holy mountains.

The Pandavas leave Yuyutsu to care for Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti and, on an auspicious morning, they set out for the Himalaya with a force of chariots and men.

Word of the Aswamedha reaches Krishna and he and his Vrishnis set out from Dwaraka. They arrive in Hastinapura a month before the Pandavas return. Having quite forgotten the rage that seized him when he saw Duryodhana felled, Balarama also rides with Krishna. There is another reason why Krishna arrives early; there is another task for him in the city of the Kurus. Abhimanyu's wife Uttaraa is in mourning. She cannot forget her dead husband, that the time they spent together was so short. Uttaraa carries Abhimanyu's child in her womb and her confinement is near.

Krishna arrives early in Hastinapura because, after Aswatthama's curse that the brahmasirsa would destroy every unborn Pandava, the Dark One swore he would restore life to Uttaraa's child. Great anticipation is alive in the city as the day draws near. At last, on a bright still morning, the princess delivers a fine son. But their cries of celebration die on the midwives' lips and shrill wailing breaks out. With Satyaki at his side, Krishna rushes to the chamber of birth.

They meet Kunti stumbling out from Uttaraa's room, her face covered, sobbing. Kunti sees Krishna and cries, "Only you can save us now! Abhimanyu's son is stillborn. Oh, he looks almost alive and he is so handsome. But no breath stirs in him and his heart doesn't beat in his chest. It will be the end of the Kuru line if he does not live. You must give life to Uttaraa's son, Krishna, you must!"

She falls on the floor and clasps her nephew's feet. Gently, Krishna raises her up. He says, "I have sworn Uttaraa's son will live, even if I have to use up all my punya to give him life."

Krishna enters Uttaraa's chamber, where Draupadi is in tears and Subhadra is inconsolable. When Uttaraa sees Krishna, she jumps up, naked, from her bed and runs dementedly to him. She also kneels at his feet, "Lord, save my child, or I will take my own life!"

She faints and her women lift her up and set her on her bed again. Krishna approaches that bed and sees the perfect infant lying there, as if he slept. Though his eyes are wide open, they stare glassily and no breath moves his chest. Krishna grows very still. The smile vanishes from his face and his eyes glow uncannily. The women fall hushed, they have never seen him like this before.

Krishna gazes intently at just the lifeless child, as if the rest of the world has ceased to exist. In a whisper, he asks for holy water. Pouring some into his palm, he murmurs quiet words over Uttaraa's child and sprinkles the water over him. The air in the room is electric, no one stirs; why, they hardly breathe, for the dhyana of the Blue God. In a trance, Krishna takes the baby in his hands. Unearthly light is upon the Avatara. He shines like the night sky when a full moon rises into it.

The child is limp in his hands. Slowly, Krishna passes his hands along the infant's body, from his feet up over his legs, his belly and chest, to his fine head. The women in that room can almost see the prana passing from Krishna's fingers into the unbreathing child.

Krishna says, "If I have always served dharma, let this child have life!"

The baby stirs, his limbs twitch. His tiny mouth puckers up, a spark of life ignites in his eyes. Next moment, he kicks his legs and begins to cry in a magnificent little voice!¹

In a dream, Uttaraa's eyes fly open. In a dream, she hears her son crying. In an incredulous dream, she sees a radiant Krishna bring her baby to her: a living child that wails for her breast. In an ecstasy, Uttara takes her son in her arms. Around them, the other women stand frozen, like women in a painting. Krishna turns and, smiling, walks out of the room. A tumult of joy breaks out behind him.

Krishna comes out of Uttaraa's door. Now sweat streams down his ashen face, his body is drenched in it. Trembling, he staggers down the passage to a dark corner. He looks as if he has aged a hundred years, since he went into Uttaraa's room of labor. Krishna thinks he is alone. Satyaki stands at the far end of the passage and seeing his cousin, comes forward quietly. Krishna crosses unsteadily to a stone seat in an alcove and sits on it, his chest heaving. Sas aki stops himself, when he sees the state in which Krishna is.

He stands in the shadows, watching, as the Avatara shuts his eyes and yokes himself in dhyana. Krishna slips into samadhi; Satyaki stands watching him. Gradually, the Dark One stops shaking. Satyaki sees the unearthly light that

enfolds him, pulsing. Krishna sits for some moments, wrapped in the light. When his breathing is even again and the color flushes back into his face, the mystic light begins to fade, until it vanishes.

As long as he lives, Satyaki will never forget those moments. Krishna was so far away then; he could have been on another world, or in another kalpa. Satyaki stands transfixed by what he has seen and then Krishna opens his eyes. The familiar, slightly mocking smile is back on his lips. He is quite himself again, as if nothing exceptional had occurred.

Satyaki approaches him with folded hands and says, “Abhimanyu lives in Uttaraa’s child. This is a greater victory for you than the war!”

Krishna takes his hand and says quietly, “Yes, Satyaki, this was harder than winning the war. But come now, surely it is time to celebrate.”

Arms linked, they walk back to the main palace.

A month passes; then, word comes to Hastinapura that the Pandavas are on their way home. Following Vyasa’s directions, they have discovered king Marutta’s treasure-trove. With Dhaumya their priest, Yudhishtira and his brothers worshipped Lord Siva on the Himalaya. Then they excavated the mountain and when they dug fifty hands, they found a buried rock chamber. In it lay an unimaginable hoard, wealth like the Pandavas had not owned even during the days of the Rajasuya yagna in Indraprastha. They found gold and golden vessels, chests and caskets full of incredible jewels.

It took them ten days to bring up that treasure. It was loaded onto elephants’, horses’, mules’ and camels’ backs and in chariots² and countless men helped carry it all back to Hastinapura. Miraculously, the Kurus were masters of untold wealth once more.

The entire city has turned out to welcome them home. Indeed, on the very day they discovered the treasure on the Himalaya, Abhimanyu’s son was born in Hastinapura and Krishna restored him to life. The palace in Hastina is a temple of hope, surging again through the kingdom. Even the forlorn Subhadra hardly cries any more but grows engrossed in the little one, her grandson.

Krishna gives the heir to the Kuru throne the name Vyasa muni wanted. “He is born after the war and he has already known death. He is a tested one, let him be called Parikshita.”

Word arrives that Yudhishtira and his brothers have returned. Krishna rides out of the city to receive his cousins. Yudhishtira jumps down from his chariot and runs to the Dark One and they embrace. A sea change has come over the

Kuru king. His dejection has vanished; instead, he glows with new contentment. They are a wealthy kingdom again and Yudhishtira is not past rejoicing at this for his people's sake. Besides, the Himalaya has healed a favored son. One by one, the other Pan-davas come to embrace Krishna and they tell him about their quest for the treasure.

As they enter the city-gates, Krishna says to them, "Uttaraa is a mother now. Your grandson is called Parikshita."

Such joy breaks out on the Pandavas' faces. Bheema gives a roar of delight. Yudhishtira cries, "And he lives, Krishna?"

"I swore he would, didn't I?"

They cannot wait to see Parikshita and they ride quickly to the palace. The people crowd the streets to welcome their king home. When they see the wealth the Pandavas have brought, singing and dancing break out and the celebrations last through the night.

Back in the palace, Abhimanyu's father and his uncles can hardly put the little prince down. Any straggle of gloom in Yudhishtira's heart vanishes, when he sees Parikshita and takes him in his arms. They pass the handsome child from hand to hand and the quaintest sight is Bheema holding him in his arms. There is no doubt left in anyone's mind that a bright new time has dawned over the destiny of the Kurus; and the time of darkness that Duryodhana brought has ended. Once more, there is a future to look forward to, a future that Abhimanyu's son will rule one day.

More enthusiastically than anyone else, Yudhishtira throws himself into planning for that future. Vyasa returns, timely as ever, to Hastinapura. Yudhishtira says to his grandfather, the muni, "We have treasure now, my lord. If you bless me, I will perform the Aswamedha yagna."

Vyasa says, "The yagna will purify the earth and all of you of the sin of the killing you saw and did. You must not waste any more time."

Yudhishtira has another thought. He goes to Krishna and says, "My Lord, if it hadn't been for you, we would never have won the war. You must perform the Aswamedha yagna, to exorcise us of the sins of Kurukshetra. I beg you, do this for my sake."

Krishna laughs, "Now I know beyond any doubt that you must perform the Aswamedha. My noble cousin, no other king has the relinquishment you do. You are lord of the earth, king of the Kurus and I am happy to serve you. The performance of the Aswamedha yagna is a tradition in your royal House. I am

content as I am, but my joy increases, day by day, as I see all my dreams being realized. Perform the yagna, Yudhishtira: to me, it will be just as if I did it myself.”

Plainly, Krishna means what he says. The truth is that he has been deeply concerned about Yudhishtira; he had feared the Pandava might never recover from his remorse. Now he sees him full of hope at the birth of Parikshita and he is relieved. For the Avatara, it is another battle won.

Vyasa finds an auspicious day for the yagna to begin. The finest white horse in the king’s stables is chosen to be the sacrificial animal. Yudhishtira asks, “Everything is ready. But who will ride with the horse through the kingdoms of Bharatavarsha?”

“Arjuna is the archer; let him go with the horse,” says Vyasa. “Let Bheema, Nakula and Sahadeva remain here with you and do whatever needs to be done in Hastinapura for the sacrifice.”

Yudhishtira turns to a beaming Arjuna, “My brother, go with our army and invite all the kings of Bharatavarsha to the Aswamedha. If any of them opposes you, subdue him in battle. But, Arjuna, as much as you can, avoid bloodshed.”

Arjuna takes the initiatory bath. He sets out in his chariot with the white horse going before him and an army and some brahmanas following. The Pandava goes forth in elation. The people mill in the streets and the thunder of the Gandiva’s bowstring resounds through the city.

After Arjuna leaves, preparations begin in earnest in Hastinapura and Bheema and the twins oversee them. A hundred kings will arrive shortly in the Kuru capital and they must be housed and feted royally. Another small city comes up quickly within Hastinapura; at its heart is a wonderful yag-nashala with golden pillars. Meanwhile, Yudhishtira takes his vows as the sacrificer and sits before the yagna fire, his chest covered with the skin of a black buck, his loins with red silk and a staff in his hand. Vyasa and countless other brahmanas gather in the city of elephants to bless the Kuru emperor. They have come to usher in the new age that is upon the world, the kali yuga, as auspiciously as they can. Of course, at the back of their minds, a shadow lingers: of the other bloody yagna on Kurukshetra with which the kali began. But they have seen enough evil for a lifetime; and if anyone thinks of what sort of age this is that began with such a war, no one says anything about it. They are content to mind the day, as best they can.

Meanwhile, Arjuna follows the white horse through Bharatavarsha. They

ride north first and hardly a king dares obstruct them. They turn east and a few lords of the earth have to be quelled with battle. After the war at Kurukshetra, there are hardly any kshatriyas left in the world with stomach for a fight against Arjuna. West and south, also, the Pandava conquers and all the kings of the sacred land submit once more to Yudhishtira's sovereignty, as they did during the Rajasuya yagna³.

A month before Arjuna rides home, these kshatriyas begin to converge on Hastinapura with their legions for Yudhishtira's horse sacrifice. They bring treasures for the Kuru emperor. The awareness of a new age is upon them all and they come keenly to the Kuru capital, to forge and renew their ties with the most powerful monarch in the world and to establish a new peace on earth.

Bheema and the twins have seen to it that Hastinapura is splendid with its new mansions and sabhas. The guests are wonderstruck by the yagnashala that stands at the heart of the city, reminiscent of another sabha in another city: a sabha that sparked such envy that a war to end all wars was fought in the world.

Bheema, of course, is in charge of the kitchen that serves the visiting kings; and it can be safely said the fare in Hastinapura is even more extraordinary than it was fifteen years ago in Indraprastha. For, in between, Bheema had served a year in Virata's kitchens and he had learnt a good deal of the culinary art during that year. With typical humility, Yudhishtira receives his guests and shows them to the mansions where they will stay.

All the kings have arrived and at last, one day, the white horse canters into Hastinapura, with Arjuna just behind it. Dhritarashtra and Yudhishtira go out to the gates to welcome home the conquering kshatriya and the city begins its celebrations. The next morning, with Vyasa and his hundred rishis presiding over the ritual, the horse is sacrificed to the Gods. The animal is cut into pieces and then Draupadi, the queen, is made to sit next to these. The brahmanas then cook the marrow of the dead steed and the Pandavas all sniff the fumes from the boiling marrow—which would remove every stain of sin from them. The other portions of the horse are fed to the sacred fire and for the second time, Yudhishtira is crowned emperor of Bharatavarsha.

Those who were there say that the Pandavas, Krishna and all the Yadavas are present at Yudhishtira's Aswamedha yagna. But the other kings who attend are either sons or nephews of the lords of the earth that came to the Rajasuya in Indraprastha: their sires and elders have all perished in the war.

The yagna is concluded and Yudhishtira the sacrificer turns to his grandfather Vyasa and says, "Take all this earth we have conquered, Muni, as

our gift to the brahmanas who came to our sacrifice.”

The performance of the Aswamedha yagna requires the sacrificer to give all his lands as alms. The custom was seldom observed literally, only a token offering was made. Vyasa replies, “I return this gift to you, my child. We brahmanas have no use for lands, but we have use for gold.”

Yudhishtira is insistent. “Not my brothers or I can keep what rightfully belongs to the brahmanas.”

Vyasa says, “We are moved by your generosity. But give the brahmanas gold and keep the lands for yourselves.”

Yudhishtira is about to protest again, when Krishna says, “Do as the muni says, Yudhishtira. He knows best.”

Yudhishtira gives the brahmanas millions of gold coins, as well as the golden vessels from king Marutta’s hoard that was used at the yagna. One by one, the visiting kings depart: dazzled by the sacrifice, overwhelmed by the wealth and the generosity of Yudhishtira Chakravarti.

Just as the Aswamedha yagna is being wound up, the queerest thing happens. In the midst of the brahmanas, the Pandavas and Vrishnis, a blue-eyed mongoose makes his appearance. He is an extraordinary creature, for half his pelt is shimmering gold! The mongoose speaks to the Kuru king and the others in perfect human speech, “Yudhishtira, your yagna isn’t half as great as the sacrifice of the Kurukshetra brahmana.”

The brahmanas and kshatriyas crowd around the exceptional creature. One priest asks, “Everything at this Aswamedha has been conducted according to the Shastras. What fault do you find with it?”

The mongoose laughs. “It isn’t a lie I tell and I don’t speak from vanity. But neither your yagna nor your king’s generosity is equal to those of the poor brahmana of Kurukshetra, whose only offering was four bowls of gruel.”

The munis are incredulous. They say, “We have followed the Shastras in every particular. How can you compare the poor brahmana’s sacrifice with this one?”

The mongoose replies, “I was there at that yagna of yagnas and just seeing it made half my body turn golden. Listen, if you want to hear about that sacrifice.

Long ago, in Kurukshetra, a brahmana lived on the grain that his neighbors, the farmers, threw away. This hardly amounted to anything and he, his wife, his

son and daughter-in-law ate but once in three days. Sometimes, they ate only once in five days, barely keeping body and soul together. A terrible drought fell upon that land. It did not rain and the earth grew parched and all the fields dried up and lay desolate. The poor brahmana's family starved.

One day, they could not bear the pangs of hunger that tore at them and went to forage for some food. After wandering for hours, in blazing heat and blinding dust and they often collapsed from weakness, they managed to collect a few handfuls of coarse barley and came home with it.

They cooked gruel from the arid grains. They divided the gruel in four bowls and sat down to eat, when a guest arrived at the door, a stranger. The brahmana rose and offered him a place at his table. The silent stranger came in and sat down. Shyly, the brahmana set his bowl of gruel before the man. The stranger quickly ate the gruel. He looked up when he had finished and he was not satisfied.

The brahmana was embarrassed, hardly knowing what to do. His wife called from the kitchen. She pressed her bowl into her husband's hands and said, 'Give the visitor my gruel as well. If you can go hungry, so can I.'

Almost in tears, he gave her portion to the stranger. In no time, the guest licked the second bowl clean, then looked around, obviously not sated still. The brahmana's son called his father and pressed his uneaten gruel into his hands. 'I, too, can starve, father. Let our guest eat.'

The brahmana began to protest, but his son was adamant and the stranger had the third bowl of gruel. He still looked around him hopefully. The daughter-in-law called the old brahmana and handed him her bowl. The brahmana said, 'No, my child! I cannot take this from you.'

She would not listen and the fourth bowl of gruel was also set before the stranger and he emptied it quickly, as if it was the finest delicacy he had ever tasted. Suddenly, the stranger's body shone with heaven's light. He said, 'Brahmanas, your generosity isn't of this world.'

A shower of petal-rain fell in that humble home, its fragrance was divine. The poor brahmana and his family stood astonished. Their guest went on, 'Your generosity has earned you a place in Devaloka.' He pointed through the door, 'Look, Lord Indra has sent a vimana for you. Your sacrifice is greater than any Aswamedha or Rajasuya. Come, let us go.'

The poor brahmana family followed the stranger into the marvelous vimana and he took them into heaven. I had been hiding in my corner, watching all this

and when the brahmanas flew away with the messenger, I came out. I was also hungry and I saw that a few drops of the barley gruel had fallen onto the floor. Oh, it smelled so wonderful, better than any other food! I crept up and licked up those fallen drops, at once half my pelt turned golden.

Since that day, my friends, I make it a point to visit every yagna in the land of Bharata to see if I can turn the other half of myself golden. So far, though I have been at countless sacrifices, a Rajasuya and an Aswamedha among them, I have not found a yagna to match that of the brahmana of Kuruk-shetra. Look, the proof is upon my pelt: only half of me is gold. Yudhishtira, non-violence, self-restraint, contentment, uprightness and gentleness, sincerity, austerity, truthfulness and charity are superior to the greatest ritual sacrifices. All the fine offerings of your yagna are not equal to a few drops of the poor brahmana's gruel!"

With that, the mongoose vanishes⁴. Krishna stands smiling to himself and all the others have something to ponder. Soon, it is time for their royal guests to depart and last of all, Krishna, Balarama, Satyaki and their Yadavas leave Hastinapura to return to Dwaraka on the ocean. Though the Aswamedha yagna might not have been as great as the poor brahmanas' sacrifice, it does wash their sins of the war from the Pandavas. Peace returns to Yudhishtira's spirit. The nightmares that ravaged him since Kurukshetra no longer stalk his sleep. With Parikshita as their hope for the future, the sons of Pandu begin a long and blessed reign from Hastinapura.

BOOK FIFTEEN

ASRAMAVASIKA PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

THE PASSING OF THE ELDERS

When the Aswamedha is completed, Yudhishtira goes back in earnest to his task of ruling the Kuru kingdom. The eldest Pandava is a king of dharma, blessed by the Gods in heaven and by Krishna on earth and his reign is all that was expected of such a noble prince. The kingdom blooms at his touch. The people are contented: their lives flow pure and fruitful. Prosperity sweeps Bharatavarsha, as if a Deva sat upon the throne of Hastinapura.

Yudhishtira is king of the Kurus; but whenever he has to take an important decision, Pandu's son is careful to consult Dhritarashtra. Uncle and nephew grow close and the bitterness between them melts. Yudhishtira still treats Dhritarashtra like a father and Gandhari with as much love he shows Kunti. Indeed, if anyone ever disparages the old king or queen, he runs the risk of incurring Yudhishtira's wrath.

Yudhishtira brings costly robes, the finest mairaya wines, rare and delectable fish, sherbets, honey and a hundred other delicacies to Dhritarashtra. When kings of other lands visit Hastinapura, they all come to meet the blind one even as they used to when he was king. Kunti herself shows Gandhari the utmost respect, while Panchali, Subhadra and Ulupi and Chitrangada, when they came to Hastinapura, all wait upon her like serving maids. Gandhari's bitterness melts and she begins to love the Pandavas as her own sons.

Acharya Kripa lives in Hastinapura again and perhaps the noblest thing Yudhishtira does is to reinstate him in the Kuru sabha. He even appoints Kripa as young Parikshita's guru. Fifteen peaceful years pass and as is the way with men, the war is almost forgotten. Kripa, Sanjaya and Vidura have the responsibility of seeing Dhritarashtra never wants for anything. They are his constant companions. Vyasa often visits his son and recounts ancient legends from the Puranas to him—tales of rishis and devarishis of the olden days, as well as those of the pitrs and the rakshasas. Yudhishtira is as loving as a son and Yuyutsu also takes to spending time with his aging father. But Dhritarashtra's heart is not in Hastinapura. It is far away, with a son of his whom he can never forget, his favorite, who is no longer in the world. Dhritarashtra pines for Duryodhana.

The old king is so well cared for in Hastina that he has no cause for complaint. He has no immediate reason to tell Yudhishtira that he longs to go away to the forest, to embark on the final journey of his life: that he longs to die

and be with his Duryodhana again. But one day, fifteen years after the war, fate takes a hand in Dhritarashtra's life.

There is someone in Hastinapura who has never forgiven the blind king for everything that happened. Bheema cannot forgive his uncle. In deference to Yudhishtira, he is never openly hostile toward Dhritarashtra or Gandhari; but within him, he is full of rancor. For fifteen years, somehow, Bheema controls himself and gives neither Dhritarashtra nor Gandhari any offence. But he seethes every time he sees them, certain that they have not been punished as they deserve.

One evening, Bheema sees Dhritarashtra and Gandhari sitting on an open terrace, taking the air outside their royal apartment. He himself is out for a walk with some friends. Suddenly, a compulsion to hurt the old people seizes him. Pretending he has not noticed them, he boasts loudly, "No man on earth is as strong as Bheemasena. With these arms I crushed all the hundred sons of that blind fool!"

Bheema gives a gory account of how he killed some of his cousins on Kurukshetra. When he finishes, he wanders off with his companions. Dhritarashtra and Gandhari sit very still. Finally, with a sigh, Dhritarashtra says, "I feel weak, I must lie down."

He goes in and Gandhari follows him. Four days pass and the king neither eats, nor stirs from his bed. On the fifth day, Dhritarashtra calls Yudhishtira, Vidura and some others to his chambers.

He says, "We all know the Kuru House was divided because of me, because I would not listen to wise counsel. I have been happy here in Hastinapura and well looked after, these fifteen years. But I have thought about my sins and their horrible consequence. Yudhishtira, my son, I have decided the only way for me to find expiation is to go into the jungle and do penance. I must atone for my crimes, before I can leave this world in peace. Gandhari and I have made up our minds to spend the rest of our days in the vana, in tapasya.

Yudhishtira, you are the king in Hastinapura now and I beg you to let me go."

Yudhishtira cries, "What a fool I am that I did not see how unhappy you have been! You look so weak, my lord, what has happened to you? I swear I will mend all that, if I have to serve you myself. For heaven's sake, do not speak of going away. Don't even think of it."

Dhritarashtra says, "My child, since the eldest times, our ancestors

renounced the world in their final days and sought peace in the jungle.”

“I will not let you go! If you do, I will come with you into the forest myself.”

The argument continues for some time, then, Dhritarashtra becomes very agitated. He gets up and cries, “Sanjaya! Kripa! Vidura! Explain to Yudhishtira that I am exhausted and I cannot argue any more. Tell him I must go into the jungle to find my peace!”

He sways on his feet and almost falls, except that Gandhari reaches out blindly and catches him. Yudhishtira takes Dhritarashtra in his arms and helps him sit down. “Look how weak you have grown. The king who crushed an iron statue in his arms can’t stand a moment’s argument.”

His uncle says, “It is four days since I ate, child. But your loving touch has refreshed me. You must let me go to the forest.”

“I will do anything you want, but you must eat something first.”

“I will eat only after you say you will let me go.”

Timely as ever, Vyasa arrives in the palace and knocks on Dhritarashtra’s door. He is told what has happened there and, after listening gravely to both Dhritarashtra and Yudhishtira, the rishi says, “Yudhishtira, you must allow your uncle to leave. His time for penance and prayer has arrived.”

Yudhishtira looks stricken. After a long moment, he assents numbly, “If you say so, my lord.”

Once the matter is decided, Yudhishtira himself brings food and Dhritarashtra eats a little. Later that evening, they sit together, uncle and nephew and the old man has some kindly words of advice for the Pandava. The most important counsel he has is: “Always surround yourself with wise men, who are good-hearted. And on all vital matters, be sure you consult them and heed what they say.”

That night, Gandhari asks, “When do we actually leave?”

Dhritarashtra replies, “Very soon. I must speak to the people first.”

Yudhishtira is told his uncle wants to address the people and arrangements are made for men from every walk of life, the citizen’s representatives, to gather in the palace yard.

Dhritarashtra says to them, “My friends, Gandhari and I have decided to leave for the forest to do tapasya. Yudhishtira and Muni Vyasa have agreed to let

us go. I want to ask your permission, as well. I also wanted to tell you all that I have been happier during Yudhishtira's rule than I was during Duryodhana's. My nephew has looked after me as if I was his own father and I have enjoyed peace of mind as never before. But I am old and all my sons are dead. You must let me go away."

His eyes are moist. "Friends, try to forgive me for whatever happened when I was your king. My sons were selfish and arrogant and I beg your forgiveness for them, too. I beg you, let me go in peace."

A whispered discussion follows among the crowd and then a brahmana called Samba mounts the palace steps where Dhritarashtra stands. Samba says, "My lord, the people have chosen me to speak for them. We want to tell you that you have been like an older brother to us. It was not you or your sons that caused the great carnage, but irresistible fate. If you truly want to go into vanavasa, you have our leave. We will miss you, Dhritarashtra, you will always be in our hearts."

Dhritarashtra's blind eyes spill tears. One by one, the men in the crowd come up to him and they take his hands tenderly, some embrace him.

The next day, Vidura arrives in Yudhishtira's presence with a message. "Dhritarashtra wants to leave on the day of the next full moon, in the month of Kartika. Before he goes, he wants to perform a sraddha for Bheeshma and Drona and his sons. He wants some gold for this."

Yudhishtira and Arjuna say what a good idea it is, but Bheema jumps up and cries, "We shouldn't give him a cowry! That hypocrite is responsible for everything we suffered and he dares ask for gold."

Arjuna says gently, "Whatever happened, he is our uncle and he kept us for many years in Hastinapura. We all have weaknesses and make mistakes, Bheema. This is the last thing he wants from us. We must not refuse him."

Bheema says hotly, "We will do whatever sraddha is needed for the dead. Dhritarashtra need have no part in it!"

Beside himself and guilty as well, since he knows the immediate cause for the old king's leaving, Bheema begins a tirade against Dhritarashtra, listing everything he had done to them, or acquiesced in. Yudhishtira cuts him short, "That will do, Bheema! Be quiet now."

From the look in his brother's eye, Bheema knows Yudhishtira has guessed the truth. He falls silent, squirming. Yudhishtira tells Vidura, "Uncle, please tell Dhritarashtra he can have whatever he wants for the sraddha. No expense, no

effort, shall be spared.”

Dhritarashtra undertakes an elaborate ten-day ritual, as an offering to all those who had lost their lives in the war. By Yudhishtira’s command, untold wealth is distributed on Dhritarashtra’s behalf. He that was to receive a hundred gets a thousand, while the one who was to be given a thousand receives ten times as much. On the last day of the sraddha, Yudhishtira learns Kunti means to go to the forest with Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. He is shaken. All the Pandavas, Draupadi, Subhadra, Uttaraa and Parikshita beg her to change her mind. But she is adamant.

Yudhishtira clasps her feet and cries, “Mother, you asked us to fight the war and win back the kingdom. How can you even think of leaving us and going away? All this is for you, don’t abandon us now.”

“Whatever I did was for my sons’ sake. I have lived long enough to enjoy my great-grandchild for fifteen years. My place is not here, any more, but with Gandhari and Dhritarashtra. Our time in the world is over, let me go in peace.”

The next day, when Yudhishtira actually sees Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti emerge from the palace, wearing deerskin and tree-bark, he flings his arms around his uncle and cries, “Don’t leave He will not let them pass, until Arjuna draws him aside firmly, saying, “Calm yourself, my lord. This is not how you must send them on their way.”

There is another shock in store for the Kuru king. Two more figures, clad in valkala, emerge shyly from the palace. They have not had the courage to tell Yudhishtira that they, too, mean to go away. When he sees them, he begins to sob more loudly: Vidura and Sanjaya mean to follow Dhritarashtra into the forest.

The Pandavas walk through the thronging streets behind the renunciates, with Panchali, Sub-hadra, Uttaraa, Chitrangadaa and other women of the city, brahmana, kshatriya, vaisya and sudra, wailing like a swarm of bereaved birds. All the people have turned out to bid farewell to the elders. At last, at the city-gates, with many an embrace, they part. On Vidura’s arm, Dhritarashtra walks away into the open spaces of Aryavarta and Kunti leads Gandhari by her hand. They are heading first for the Ganga and Vyasa’s asrama on her banks, where Dhritarashtra receives his first initiation into san-nyasa. Then they go to the forest asrama of the Rishi Satayupa, who, at Vyasa’s behest, instructs Dhritarashtra further.

The munis of the wilds welcome Dhritarashtra and his companions and they begin living an ascetic life in the forest. Vyasa’s eldest son proves an eager

tapasvin and in a few months little remains of the Kuru king of measureless power. Instead, an austere rishi takes his place. Dhritarashtra mortifies himself and spends his days and nights in ceaseless prayer. Soon he has reduced himself to maci-lence and his body takes on a fine luster. Slowly, the blind king's sins are burned from him.

A year passes and in Hastinapura not a day goes by without Yudhishtira and his brothers thinking of their mother Kunti and missing her more than they can bear. They never speak of her, for that would make them unbearably sad. One day, when all five Pandavas sit together with Draupadi, Yudhishtira says, "I wonder how our uncles fare in the forest."

Sahadeva, who has been waiting a year for this, cries, "And our mother! Yudhishtira, can't we visit them just once, to see how they are?"

Draupadi puts in, "I long to see mother. The women of the palace can't wait to go and meet Gandhari and Kunti again!"

Yudhishtira looks at the others and sees the eagerness on every face. He calls the captain of his guard. "We will leave for the forest tomorrow to visit our uncle. Make preparations and let it be announced in the streets that anyone who wants to go with us shall be welcome."

Sahadeva can hardly contain his excitement. Early next morning, a royal party, with elephants, chariots, horses and palanquins for the women of the palace, sets out from Hastinapura; with them, go a hundred mules, laden with provisions. Yuyutsu and Dhaumya are left in charge of the kingdom. Yudhishtira waits five days outside the city, for anyone that cares to join his party. Then, after a day's journey, the company arrives on the fringes of the forest where Dhritarashtra has taken sannyasa.

Yudhishtira orders camp made at the edge of the vana, for they must not disturb the tapasvin rishis within. The Pandavas enter the forest on foot. Asking directions from the hermits they meet, they make their way to the asrama where Dhritarashtra, Kunti and Gandhari live. An aged muni in the asrama tells them, "You will find him at the river. He has gone to bathe and to gather flowers for his worship. Gandhari and Kunti are with him."

The Pandavas set out toward the Yamuna and coming toward them from a distance, they see their uncle, aunt and mother. Sahadeva gives a cry, runs to Kunti and flings himself at her feet. She raises him up and hugs him: kissing him, sobbing to see her favorite child again. The others come up and Dhritarashtra weeps for joy to see his nephews. At last, he has truly become the

loving uncle he would have always been, except for his overpowering attachment for Duryodhana.

Sanjaya is there, faithful to the last, serving Dhritarashtra as he has always done. Later, when they sit together in the asrama and the people greet their old king, Dhritarashtra says, “Having you all here makes me feel I am back in the palace at Hastinapura.”

Yudhishtira asks, “But where is Vidura? Doesn’t he live with you?”

One of the rishis says, “He has gone beyond us all. He lives by himself in the deepest jungle. He does not eat, but mortifies his body. Only rarely he comes to visit us and then he never says a word.”

At that moment, another muni gives a shout, “There he is! It is Vidura.”

They catch a fleeting glimpse of a wild-looking figure at the edge of the hermitage, darting away into the trees. Dhritarashtra says, “He is shy of men now. He will not come where there are even two or three people.”

Another muni says to Yudhishtira, “If you want to see him, we will show you the way to where he sits in dhyana. But you must go alone, or you won’t find him.”

Yudhishtira gets up and follows the rishis into the deeper forest. Soon, the others point him ahead and say he should go on by himself. As he walks on, the trees grow closer together and the awning of branches overhead is so thick hardly any sunlight penetrates it. The silence here is a reverberant presence, as if God is very near.

Slowly, Yudhishtira goes forward, until suddenly he senses he is not alone any more. He pauses to let his eyes grow accustomed to the gloom. Nothing stirs and the Pandava walks on again. He hears a low cough to his left and spins around. He can hardly recognize the emaciated hermit leaning against a tree. The bizarre and naked figure is covered in mud, leaves and the pollen of many flowers, as if the jungle has claimed him entirely. He is hardly more than a skeleton, for there is so little flesh on him and his skin hangs loose. But Vidura’s body is luminous in the forest’s dimness; his eyes glow like torches.

Yudhishtira calls softly, “Uncle, Vidura, it is I, Yudhishtira.”

Vidura makes no reply, only the burning eyes seize Yudhishtira’s in an irresistible gaze. The Pandava realizes Vidura is past being able to speak, but those eyes hold him in their brilliant trance. They are surely mad, but in the most sublime way: with having seen God. Yudhishtira stands rooted by that gaze; and

then the strangest thing happens to the Kuru king. Uncannily, he begins to feel older and wiser, as if another, sager, being was entering his very body, limb by limb, breath by breath. The Pandava trembles at the subtle possession. He feels his mind being immeasurably enriched, with an intelligence and wisdom far beyond his own.

Then, Vidura's glowing eyes flicker and burn no more; they are lamps put out. Yudhishtira approaches the attenuated form, which still leans against the tree. He reaches out and touches Vidura's face, but life has left the skeletal body. Yet, within himself, the Pandava can clearly feel his uncle's gentle presence. He stands for a moment, astonished and a little uncertain. He thinks he must carry Vidura's body back to the asrama to be cremated.

An asariri speaks to him: "Vidura was an incarnation of dharma, just as you are, Yudhishtira. He is with you forever now. You must not burn his body, nor remove it from this place. Your uncle was a sannyasin when he died and now he is part of you. Let the forest absorb his mortal remains."

Yudhishtira turns back to the asrama and recounts his experience to the others. He and his brothers light a fire and spend the night under the trees. The people of Hastinapura return to the city in a day or two, but the sons of Pandu stay a month in the forest with their mother and their uncle and, also, visiting other asramas.

During this time, the Pandavas notice that, for all his tapasya, Dhritarashtra is not yet at peace with himself. Some nights, they see him come out of his hut and stand staring at the dark jungle; often, a spasm of grief convulses him and he shakes with sobs. Then, one day, when the Pandavas themselves are away in another asrama, Vyasa arrives in the asrama. When they sit together, speaking of many things, Dhritarashtra bursts into tears.

He prostrates himself before Vyasa and cries, "Father, I cannot bear this sorrow any more! Where are my sons now, in which world? Are they in some terrible hell, paying for their sins?"

Draupadi, Subhadra and Uttaraa also begin to sob. Panchali asks, "Where are my sons, Muni? I hardly knew them, before death snatched them from me."

Subhadra and Uttaraa wail, "Where is Abhimanyu?"

Dhritarashtra says in anguish, "Ten million men perished for my sin. How can I ever forgive myself? Where are they all now, who died such violent deaths? Oh, where are my grandsons?"

Gandhari adds her voice to the others. "No grief is as cruel as not knowing

where our husbands and our sons are. No prayer, not all the wisdom in the world can cure the uncertainty and anguish we women feel.”

Kunti says, “Where is my Karna? I was his mother and I was responsible for everything he suffered and for his death. Now he is gone forever, who can tell me where?”

Dhritarashtra says, “Father, this is what torments us. Who has ever died and returned to the world to tell us that there is indeed life after dying? No one knows for certain.”

Vyasa shuts his eyes in dhyana. Silence falls on the company. After a short while, the rishi rises and says, “Come to the Ganga with me. You shall have an answer to your doubts.”

Away in the west, the sun is sinking and twilight falls over the world when they arrive on the banks of the sacred river. They bathe in her warm currents, worship the setting sun and come ashore. Vyasa remains standing in the Ganga, waist-deep in her flow. He begins to chant some resonant mantras in a primitive tongue. Like flights of birds they fly out from his throat and seem to glimmer everywhere through the twilight world. At last they fly over the river and plunge into her waters, setting them alight.

The Ganga takes silver fire. White waves rise as from a stormy sea; from them, a spirit host emerges and stands forth upon those waves between heaven and earth. Bheeshma is there and Drona. With them, are Karna, Duryodhana and Dhritarashtra’s hundred sons. Abhimanyu and Draupadi’s sons rise from the Ganga, down which their ashes floated so many years ago, Dhrishtadyumna and Shikhandi, Drupada and Virata, Uttara Kumara, Bhoorisravas, Jayadratha, Susharma, Bhagadatta, Shakuni and his sons and a thousand kshatriyas: like fish from a sea!

With these, is the teeming host that perished on Kurukshetra: ten million men, a generation of warriors. Those shining legions fill the river, the earth, the trees and the sky. Their bodies are lustrous, heaven’s grace is upon every man. They wear unearthly raiment and jewelry and enmity has vanished from their hearts. They are like brothers now, all of them. Elven gandharvas appear with them and sing their praise, apsaras dance for them upon the phosphorescent Ganga.

It is told Vyasa muni opens Dhritrashtra’s eyes for that night and he sees his sons and all the others, whom he had, indeed, never seen with mortal sight before. The place by the river is like Devaloka, where no fear or envy, anger or

hatred can come. The living and the dead spend that night together, in joy.

At dawn, the legion dead vanish¹, leaving the river flowing serenely again. Vyasa still stands in it, worshipping the rising sun. He says to some of the women, who have also lost their husbands to the war, “If any of you want to be with your men, enter the river now.”

Some widows do so and by Vyasa’s power their bodies dissolve in the Ganga. They rise as bright spirits and are free. Deeply consoled, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti and the younger women return to the asrama. The next day, the Pandavas also return.

The sons of Pandu give away the gifts they have brought and at last they come to Dhritarashtra and Gandhari and ask their leave to return to Hastinapura. The elders bless them, cling to them fondly, before saying farewell.

Kunti takes Yudhishtira aside. She has become more composed than he has ever seen her and says to him, “We may not meet again in this world. You must look after my Sahadeva: of all of you, I have always loved him the most. Even now, I can only think of him as a child. Bless you, Yudhishtira, my noble son. Rule long and wisely and God be with you. Go now, for my love for you impedes my tapasya.

They part in tears, Sahadeva the most visibly upset. Finally, they tear themselves away and return to Hastinapura. The Pandavas settle down again to the routine of their royal duties, which keeps them busy indeed. They have a kingdom to rule and not even in times of dharma was that an easy task.

Two years slip by and one day Narada arrives in Hastinapura, his face grave. Yudhishtira’s blood turns cold to see the look in the muni’s eyes. All the Pandavas are present in the sabha, so Narada launches directly into what he has come to tell them.

“When you left the forest, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti and Sanjaya went to Haridwara. After Vidura’s death, Dhritarashtra increased his austerities tenfold, subsisting just on air, with stones in his mouth and never speaking, until he was as lean and wild as you found Vidura. He roamed the jungle, with no fixed dwelling. Soon, all the other hermits of the forest worshipped him. The women and Sanjaya, also, spent their time in prayer and fasting. Gandhari only drank water, while Kunti took some every sixth day. One day, they were returning to their little asrama after a bath in the river, when they saw that a forest-fire had broken out around them. A stiff wind fanned the flames and they spread like light on every side. Birds and beasts fled in panic, as the fire swept closer.

Dhritarashtra cried to Sanjaya, ‘Run, Sanjaya! Save yourself, before it is too late.’

Sanjaya hesitated, but Gandhari and Kunti also cried, ‘Run Sanjaya and take news of us to the world outside. We are too weak to go with you. We will offer ourselves in the agni and find moksha.’

Sanjaya knelt at their feet and then ran for his life. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti sat cross-legged, still as posts, facing the east. The fire burned the jungle down and Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and your mother perished in it².”

Yudhishtira falls where he stands. Sahadeva’s heartbroken cries ring through the sabha. Again and again, he calls piteously to his dead mother and Draupadi has to lead him away. The other Pandavas stand dazed. Narada tries to console them; Vyasa arrives and attempts to comfort them. But this is not a grief they will get over in a day, a year, or ever. They will carry it to their deaths.

Yudhishtira asks in a whisper, “What happened to Sanjaya?”

“He climbed the Himalaya and sits in tapasya. He has also become a sannyasi.”

The Pandavas and their women come to the banks of the Ganga, all of them wearing just a single garment. With them come all the people of Hastinapura and even many from the provinces of the kingdom. Setting Yuyutsu at their head, they perform tarpana for Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti. They return to the city to ritually perform the cremation rites for the three dead. On the twelfth day, purified by a fast and other vratas, Yudhishtira performs the sraddha and gives away bounteous gifts in the names of his uncle, aunt and his mother.

Slowly, the sons of Pandu learn to carry their newest burden of grief and they plunge themselves entirely, especially Yudhishtira, into ruling the Kuru kingdom. Now they are the elders in Hasti-napura and their greatest delight is watching young Parikshita grow into a handsome, brilliant prince: the very image of Abhimanyu.

BOOK SIXTEEN
MAUSALA PARVA

ONE

RITUAL AT PRABHASA

Thirty-six years pass after the war and they are peaceful and prosperous. Yudhishtira is king in Hasti-napura and his dharma pervades Bharatavarsha. Then, in the thirty-sixth year of his reign, the Pan-dava sees sinister omens all around him, like those seen before the war. Yudhishtira is certain some calamity stalks the earth, but he does not know what it is. Jackals and wolves howl in the city-streets at noon; kites, crows and vultures wheel in dense swarms in the sky. The horses and cows of Hastinapura are restive and hardly touch their feed.

Not only in the Kuru city are evil omens seen. They are everywhere, as if the earth herself has premonition of a tragedy more terrible than any other. Storms of fire spring up, with no obvious cause and lick down whole forests. Eerie meteors streak through the sky, by day and night. Unseasonal rains lash the earth and the sea rises in tidal waves and savages the shores of Bharatavarsha. The sun and the moon shine dimly, as if stricken by sorrow, they are wrapped in black haloes. Violent tremors rock land and sea and in Dwaraka, Krishna sees the omens¹ and remembers Gandhari's curse. He knows the end of the Yadavas is near.

The dwapara yuga was over on the tenth day of the war and for thirty-six years the pale kali has crouched, awesome and sinister, on time's horizon: a Demon impatient to be loosed upon the earth.

Not as long as Krishna, the Avatara, lives in it, can the kali yuga claim the world. Krishna has a final task to fulfil, before he departs.

His Yadavas—the Vrishnis andhakas, Kukuras and the rest—are invincible. Even he has been hard-pressed to contain them, as a shore does a raging sea. Their hubris will be their undoing and Krishna knows their time has come. For his own time has come and if he leaves the world without destroying his powerful clan, they will overrun the earth. He knows that not men, why, not the Devas can tame the Yadavas of Dwaraka.

The omens are plain on the land, in the sea and the sky. In Dwaraka, only Krishna reads them clearly and what they portend. One day, Viswamitra, Kanva and Narada arrive with some other munis in the ocean city to pray at the temple of Pindarika. Deluded by fate, the Yadava princes decide to poke a little fun at the holy ones. They dress Krishna's son, Samba, in some clothes borrowed from

a fisherwoman in a nearby village and lead him, face covered, to the august rishis.

Mockingly, they prostrate themselves before the sages. One bold spark says, “This doe-eyed beauty has something to ask you, Brahmanas. She is too shy to ask herself and bids me speak for her. She is Babhru’s wife. She is pregnant and is anxious to have a son. Sages of vision, tell her if she will have a boy or a girl.”

The young men had expected a mild reproof, at worst and they are taken aback at the ferocity of the rishis’ response. His lips white, one of the wise curses them, “She will give birth to an iron club and that club will destroy the arrogant Yadava clan!”

Trembling with fright, the young men come running to Balarama. They tell him and not Krishna, what has happened: and there is, indeed, suddenly something growing in Samba’s belly. The same night, his stomach has to be incised and yields an iron club. Balarama has the club ground into powder and the powder cast into the sea, where it floats on green waves. Floating landwards with the tide, it settles fatefully on a blessed shore of confluence, at Prabhasa. That powder transforms itself into a shimmering pollen. Under the moon, the pollen grows with supernatural swiftness into a bank of silvery eraka reeds.

One perfectly arrowhead-shaped sliver of the club cannot be ground. Balarama thinks that, surely, a small sliver cannot harm the Yadava clan; he has that cast into the sea, as well. A fish swallows the sliver. The next morning, it swims into the net of some fishermen. While gutting their catch, they discard the piece of iron they find in the fish’s belly and it lies shining on a white, nocturnal beach, on a full moon night. An old hunter called Jara, abroad on his poach, spots the sliver. Jara is attracted by its perfect shape. He picks it up and fixes it to the head of his hunting arrow.

The sea swells in fury and lashes the marble walls of Dwaraka. The evil omens are out in the open, everywhere. Astrologers see cataclysmic syzygys in the heavens and Krishna, who misses none of the signs, is eager to leave the world.

One day, he says in his sabha, “Thirty-six years have passed since the war and it is time for Gandhari’s curse to take effect. We must go to Prabhasa, to seek expiation. Our ancestor Soma Deva found redemption at Prabhasa from Daksha’s curse; we might also find Salvation there, from Gandhari’s. Let our men prepare to travel to the place from where the Saraswati flows west.”

Krishna has a cousin, Uddhava, of whom he is particularly fond. As preparations get underway in Dwaraka for the pilgrimage to Prabhasa tirtha, one evening Uddhava comes alone to see Krishna. He kneels at the Dark One's feet.

"Lord, I am frightened!" he whispers and he is shaking. "Krishna, I cannot bear to be apart from you. I see signs of doom all around us. I believe you mean to kill the Yadavas and leave this world yourself."

Krishna raises Uddhava up and embraces him. "Uddhava, go to Badarikasrama upon Mount Gandhamadana. There, in the temple of Nara Narayana, you will find moksha. After I leave Dwar-aka, it will sink beneath the waves."

He speaks to Uddhava, gently expounding the eternal dharma, as he had done for Arjuna on Kurukshetra. Finally, he gives him his own wooden padukas, the ones Krishna had worn for years. Hands folded, Uddhava walks around the Dark One in pradakshina; he kisses the Avatara's blue feet, bathing them in tears. Laying a hand on his cousin's head, Krishna blesses him to attain nirvana. Uddhava leaves on his final pilgrimage, not with the other Yadavas, but alone, in another direction, bearing the precious sandals on his head.

When Uddhava has left, Krishna goes into the temple that stands in his garden, beside the parijata tree he once took from Amravati. He stands in dhyana before the stone idol in that shrine, the image he had himself created for his father Vasudeva. With a thought, he summons two resplendent beings there. They stand before him as soon as he calls them, their bodies made of heaven's light. One is Brihaspati, the guru of the Devas and the other is Vayu, the tameless wind.

Gravely, Krishna gives the sacred idol of Dwaraka into their hands. He says, "Take this holiest of my idols to Kerala, which is divided from the rest of Bharatavarsha by the western mountains. Establish it there and let it remain as a blessing upon the land, secure from the invasions of darkness that will sweep the country in the centuries to come. Let this idol stand in a shrine you must fashion yourselves in Kerala: to be a solace to all men, a lamp that will burn in the darkest nights of kali yuga."

The unearthly ones receive the image in reverent hands, of wisdom and air. They kneel before him and when he blesses them, they vanish from there with the idol. They scour the southern country of Kerala, seeking an appropriate place in which to install it. One day, they find Siva at worship in a sylvan grove beside a lake. As soon as they see him, Siva vanishes and Brihaspati and Vayu install Krishna's stone image where he sat. Thus, they found the most holy Krishna

temple in Guruvayoor, named after the both of them.

Carrying provisions for a long excursion—many kinds of food, wine and meat—the Yadava men set out for Prabhasa, with Krishna and Balarama going before them. As they ride out from the ocean city, Krishna knows his people will never see it again, bathed in the first light of day, a vision among the waves. Sorrow surges in his heart, but he forces himself to ride on. As they go, the Dark One thinks of the last time he persuaded his people to visit Prabhasa. It was a life ago, when Arjuna the yati came to Dwaraka and eloped with Subhadra. Krishna sighs; a smile touches his lips.

At Prabhasa, the Yadavas pitch their tents and as the brahmanas they have brought with them chant the Vedas, they themselves begin to celebrate. The crisp sea air exhilarates them and the drinking and feasting begin in earnest, with Krishna joining in. The tirtha-yatra turns into a raucous outing. The Vrishnis mix wine with the food prepared for the brahmanas and feed the mixture to monkeys. They have some games between the different clans and these continue through the day and the night, hardly as if they have come to expiate their sins. A week passes; then one morning, Krishna calls them together for a ritual bath. He initiates them into some unfamiliar mantras, which he says will turn away Gandhari's curse. In fact, these are last rites for safe passage from the earth.

Later that day, just before the noon meal, they all drink large quantities of the sweet and potent stimulant, maireyaka. Krishna had the maireyaka brought and he begins the drinking. The Yadavas do not notice that fate flutters down on every kshatriya's shoulder like a dove of death. They have not seen the unusual reeds, shaped like jagged thunderbolts, growing in clumps at the water's edge: silvery, ominous, eraka reeds, rustling sibilantly in the hot breeze that hums over land and sea.

Soon, every Yadava is roaring drunk. Krishna watches them, a tear glistening in his eye. Tensely, he watches them, an instinct of imminent calamity awoken in him. The different clans, the Andha-kas, the Bhojas, the Kukuras and the Vrishnis, have always envied one another and only Krishna's masterfulness has held them together for so long. Now, the maireyaka and the intense games they have been playing have made them all more than a little rumbustious.

Suddenly, with a hard look at Kritavarman, whom he has never forgiven his part in the war, Satyaki cries, "There are some here that call themselves kshatriyas, but murder their sleeping enemies at night! And then run back to their homes, never to face the consequences of what they have done."

Kritavarman's face turns crimson. "Who was it that cut off Bhoorisravas'

head when he had put down his weapons and sat in dhyana? That was truly the deed of a kshatriya!”

Drunk as they are, all the others quickly take sides and a hundred voices are raised in anger. Krishna sees death everywhere, in the waves and on the sand. He sees the silver reeds glistening in the sun, which seems to stop in mid-heaven, with prescience of the massacre to come. Krishna watches his son Pradyumna take sides with Satyaki, the Vrishni, against the Bhoja, Kritavarman. Hot words fly back and forth.

Then, Satyaki roars, “Today I will avenge Dhrishtadyumna, the finest kshatriya who fought on Kurukshetra!”

In a blur, he draws his sword and hews off Kritavarman’s head in a scarlet explosion. The other Vrishnis are some way off and hardly has Kritavarman’s head struck the earth, when the Bhojas and Andhakas fall on Satyaki and hack him to pieces. Pradyumna is the only Vrishni at Satyaki’s side. He draws his sword and slashes out wildly. He is badly outnumbered and the Andhakas and Bhojas kill Krishna’s son, too.

By now, the Vrishnis arrive and a pitched battle breaks out. Like characters in a nightmare, the Yadavas helplessly enact the tragedy that follows. Akrura flies at Bhoja; Aniruddha and Samba fall on each other. Soon, they hardly know anymore who the enemy is, nor care. Son hews at father, brother at brother, all of them unhinged with maireyaka and with Krishna’s potent maya. They fight like a pack of dogs, felling one another with savage sword-strokes. But then, they are the invincible Yadavas: the dead rise again, intoxicated and laughing! Their wounds heal miraculously and death is their ally, because they are Krishna’s own people, his flesh and blood.

Aniruddha sees the eraka reeds growing in shallow water. Moved by an instinct he hardly understands, he throws down his sword and grasps at the glittering things. Balarama cries out to him to desist; too late. When Aniruddha pulls up a clutch of the reeds grown out of the powdered club of the rishis’ curse, they turn into a dark blade in his hands. Anyone he strikes with it falls dead instantly and never rises again.

All the Yadavas pull up those macabre reeds to be their weapons, powerful as thunderbolts. Now the killing begins in earnest. Those even scratched with a silver reed die, by the curse in them. Krishna has seen his son and Satyaki both killed before his eyes. With an anguished cry, he runs forward to stop the fighting. Like any man, the Avatara had hoped some miracle could save his people at the last moment from Gandhari’s curse, from the sages’ curse. His sons

Samba, Charuka and Charu-varman turn on him, growling. They attack him viciously, like children who have repressed a lifetime of resentment and raging, festering envy. Now they are sons who hate their father more than they can bear any more and must kill him.

His cousin Akrura and all the others surround Krishna menacingly. His own head turned, with a heartbroken roar, the Dark One snatches up a handful of the deadly reeds and sets on his murdering clan. In his hands the reeds turn into a gleaming club and, roaring for fate, roaring like the God he is, roaring wild for sorrow, Krishna slaughters his Yadavas with that club. He smashes their noble heads and their splendid bodies. Blood flies everywhere, brightly in the sun, splashing into crystal water. Heads are broken like melons, handsome limbs shattered: a grisly orgy of killing and Krishna roaring above it all, above the screams of the others.

In moments, all the Yadavas are dead and Krishna stands alone among the corpses of his people, drenched in crimson, his chest heaving. Still, bloodlust rages in him.

“Balarama, where are you?” he roars, red-eyed. In a whisper, his heart calls him to the waving sea.

There, Balarama sits, calmed, under a giant aswattha tree growing at the forest’s edge. Daruka appears there and his master and he watch Balarama seated in padmasana, perfectly withdrawn in dhyana, lost to the world. Light enfolds his brother and at once Krishna grows calm. He knows he has accomplished everything for which he came into the world.

He says quietly to Daruka, “Ride to Hastinapura, my friend. Tell Arjuna what happened here and Yudhishtira. Tell Arjuna to come at once to Dwaraka, he must look after our women and children. The curse is on me, as well and my time is near.”

Daruka stands numb for a moment, hardly believing what has happened, so suddenly. Without a word, he prostrates himself at Krishna’s feet. Krishna raises him up and embraces him. He says, “Fly now, Daruka!”

The sarathy finds a chariot and rides like Vayu to Hastinapura. Krishna goes near Balarama and says, “Wait for me, brother. I must go briefly to Dwaraka, but I will fly back to you.”

There is no sign that Balarama has heard him. Black turmoil churns Krishna, as his death glides nearer. Quietening himself, somehow, he climbs into the Jaitra and flies back to Dwaraka through the air. At the palace, he runs up the

marble steps and straight into Vasudeva's presence. The world spins around Krishna, strange and terrible fires burn him. Panting and bloody, with the killing he has done, he comes into his father's chambers. Krishna runs forward and kneels at Vasudeva's feet. "Bless me, father, my end is upon me!"

With a cry, Vasudeva blesses his son. Krishna gasps, "I have sent for Arjuna, he will be here soon. Until then I leave the women and children in your care."

Vasudeva looks helplessly at his son, on whom he has always depended. Summoning all his strength, the old Yadava somehow whispers, "Go in peace, my child."

"Balarama is waiting," cries the Avatara and runs out.

On his way, he hears wailing and screaming, as the women hear the news. In passing, he cries to them, "Arjuna will be here soon, he will look after you."

Then he is gone. Krishna flies back to Balarama. He finds him still locked in padmasana, but now his body seems to be on fire: such light blazes from him. Krishna goes nearer. Suddenly, Balarama's eyes fly open, staring. He sees Krishna standing before him and smiles. Balarama's eyes close again and even as Krishna watches him, he begins to metamorphose. An immense white serpent slides slowly out of his mouth. As it comes, the snake transforms Balarama's body for its own flesh; so that when it has emerged fully, nothing is left of the man. Big as a hill, the brilliant, thousand-hooded Naga pauses a moment, its hood inclined to gaze at Krishna. It lowers itself, glides majestically into the sea and vanishes. Varuna himself, countless celestial nagas and sacred rivers receive Ananta with padya and arghya.

Krishna knows his own time has come.

TWO

KRISHNA

In a tide of memories, he sees his life flit before his eyes. After the white snake enters the sea, Krishna roams the forest around Prabhasa in a daze. It is part of Gandhari's curse coming true: that he would wander the earth, alone. He ranges a whole life in vast, crystalline remembrance.

Arjuna sits alone in his apartment in Hastinapura. All at once, he begins to think of Krishna. The Pandava's heart races and he hears Krishna's voice, 'Go and lie down, Arjuna. I want to speak to you.'

Arjuna goes to his bed. As soon as he lies on it, he falls asleep. In a dream Krishna comes to him and takes his hand. 'Arjuna, do you remember I once told you that all things in this world are born to serve a purpose? And when each one's purpose is served, it passes on.'

'You said that when my chariot burned down after the war.'

'And so it is with men. When a man has served every purpose he is born for, he doesn't live another moment in the world, but death comes for him.'

'Yes, you told me, Krishna.'

Krishna's eyes are bright in Arjuna's dream. 'Arjuna, all that I came for has been accomplished. It is time for me to go.'

'My Lord!'

'You must also come soon, Arjuna. We cannot be apart, you and I.'

'I don't understand what you mean.'

'I wanted to see you once, before I went. Now I can go in peace.'

A smile lights the Avatara's face, as he fades from Arjuna's dream and the Pandava awakes.

His soul in tumult, Krishna runs through the forest and arrives back at the aswattha tree under which Balarama was transformed. With a sigh, he sinks down on the ground. With every moment now, he feels his death draw nearer; he can feel its breath on his neck. Krishna lies on the earth in shavasana, the posture of the dead and the Brahman, the timeless Spirit, washes over him in an infinite swell. He yokes himself deeply into that Godhead and is lost in samadhi.

Jara, the hunter, is out looking for a deer. From a distance, he sees Krishna's

feet around the bole of the tree under which the Dark One lies. Jara sees the feet red with forest earth and blood from the slaughter of the Yadavas. The old hunter thinks he is seeing a red hind and he stalks the crimsoned feet. When he is within range, he raises his rough bow and taking careful aim, looses his fateful arrow. The muni Durvasa had once blessed Krishna that every part of his body would be invulnerable to all weapons, save the soles of his feet. The arrowhead made from the sliver of the accursed club flares into the sole of the Dark One's foot, piercing the base of the thumb toe. Krishna roars in shock, as fate's shaft plunges agony through him.

Jara comes running to hear that cry. Gasping to see Krishna, four-armed, knowing him at once from rumor, the hunter falls on his face before the dying Avatara. Krishna places his hand on the wild man's head and tells him, "It is only as I willed it and, my friend, you have set me free. Your mission in the world is fulfilled and you will find swarga for what you have done today."

Sobbing, the hunter takes Krishna's head onto his lap. The Avatara's face is serene, wreathed in a smile. Next moment, he is dead. His spirit issues from his body and makes all the earth glow mysteriously, as it courses into heaven, where Indra, the Aswins, Rudra, the adityas, the vasus, the viswede-vas, devarishis and siddhas come to receive him. Greeting them, he ascends beyond, as Vishnu Narayana, into his own, most exalted realm.

Then, the very world is dim: like a flower that has lost its fragrance, like a body from which the soul has gone. At that moment, the sacred river, the golden Saraswati, also vanishes from the earth forever; and, black lightning into the void Krishna leaves, the kali yuga flashes into the world, entering her fully.

THREE

ARJUNA'S ANGUISH

Riding all night with the wind that flows like a dark river across Bharatavarsha, Daruka arrives in Hastinapura early the next day. He runs into the sabha, cries, "Gandhari's curse has come true, the Yadavas are all dead!" and falls unconscious before the throne. Yudhishtira's world crumbles and the Kuru king also faints. The other Pandavas sit petrified. When Daruka revives, he tells them that Krishna wanted Arjuna to ride to Dwaraka and take charge of the Yadava women and children.

Arjuna realizes the meaning of his dream. He calls for his chariot and sets out with Daruka. They come to Prabhasa first and find the bloody remains of the Yadavas. Arjuna sees Satyaki, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Samba and the others. They are queerly preserved in death, no scavenger has touched their corpses. Controlling himself as best he can, he says in a whisper, "Where are Krishna and Balarama?"

Daruka leads him to the giant aswattha. They see the trail in the sand where the white serpent slid into the sea. There is no sign of either Krishna or his brother. They seek them in vain, for a time, then Daruka says, "We must ride to Dwaraka, the women will have panicked."

Suddenly, a terrible cry breaks out of Arjuna. Around the massive bole of the tree, he sees Krishna lying dead, a familiar smile still on his lips. Arjuna falls on the ground and clasps the blue body. In a while, Daruka says quietly, "My lord, we must go to Dwaraka."

Sixteen thousand women wait on the palace steps, in the city that has lost its lord; when they see Arjuna's chariot drive up and the Pandava alight from it, they begin to wail loudly. Slowly, Arjuna climbs the marble steps and the sobbing women lead him in. There, he sees Rukmini and Satyab-hama and the mighty Arjuna swoons. Krishna's women carry him on to a couch. The kshatriya revives slowly; but he cannot speak and tears stream down his face. He sits mute, crying, with Krishna's queens around him.

At last, he rises and goes to meet Vasudeva. When Krishna's father sees the Pandava, he puts his arms around him and sobs. Arjuna spends some time with Vasudeva and the old man says sadly, "Your sishyas Satyaki and Pradyumna are dead. They began the fighting. But, my son, the fault wasn't theirs: it was

Gandhari and the rishis' curses that killed them. It was fate. Krishna did nothing to stop the carnage. He watched his sons and his people kill one another and did nothing to stop them."

Vasudeva speaks haltingly, deep age and sorrow in his voice. After a moment's pause, he says, "Arjuna, I have no wish to live any more. I commit our women and children to your care."

Arjuna says, "I cannot live in this world without Krishna and I am sure Yudhishtira feels the same. I will take the women and children and the old people to Indraprastha with me. Allow me, uncle, I must find the ministers and make the arrangements."

Arjuna meets with the elderly courtiers who did not go to Prabhasa. He tells them, "Seven days from now, you must leave Dwaraka forever. Take whatever gold you can with you. In Indraprastha, we will crown Krishna's grandson, Vajra, king of the Yadavas."

That night, Arjuna lies in his precious cousin's bed, while memories bear him far away. He thinks of the first time he saw Krishna, it was after Draupadi's swayamvara; and all the other times, brilliant and dangerous, which they shared. Arjuna lies awake through the night in lonely vigil. He knows the meaning has gone out of his life and there is nothing left to live for.

The next morning, he has the corpses of all the Yadavas, Krishna's among them, brought to Dwaraka to be cremated. Devaki and the other women fling themselves down, hysterically, across Krishna's body. With his own hand, Arjuna touches alight the Dark One's pyre, while the sea rises to lash the ocean-city's walls. Four of Krishna's wives cannot bear to live without him and immolate themselves on his pyre. Again, a night full of memories and intolerable grief; in the morning, Arjuna finds Vasudeva locked stiff in a yogasana, dead.

Arjuna performs the last rites for Vasudeva and the Yadavas. Then, with as much of the gold of Dwaraka as they can carry, he, the Yadava women and elders, as well as the brahmanas, vaisyas and sudras leave the city of dreams in a procession of chariots. Krishna's widows number sixteen thousand and many more thousands those of the other slain kshatriyas. Now, only the wind sighs in the empty streets. Even as the last chariot drives out through the gates, the ocean rises on every side and rushes into the crystal city. A seismic, submarine earthquake shakes land and sea. As if riven by a God's awesome hand, exquisite Dwaraka breaks in two and sinks below mountainous waves. Arjuna and the women watch, the shining palaces, the wide avenues and marvelous parks submerge, in moments. Last of all, Krishna's palace sinks. No trace remains of

fabulous Dwaraka and the sea grows calm before their eyes, still as a lake.

His heart broken, Arjuna rides toward Indraprastha with the Yadava women and children. They travel for two days, then make camp, once, in the land of five rivers. They have not noticed the mlechha bandits who have been stalking them like a pack of wolves. Evening sets in and Arjuna and the women are about to begin their meal, when, with fierce yells, the bandits attack. The camp rings with the screams of the Yadu women. Arjuna jumps up and seizes his Gandiva: but he cries out in dismay when he finds he cannot string the great bow! The Pandava's hands shake, his body trembles, sweat stands out on his brow, while the brigands take whatever they want, unopposed. With a huge effort, Arjuna manages to string his weapon. When he tries to summon an astra to burn the marauders, he cannot remember a single mantra.

Roaring in despair, Arjuna reaches for his magic quivers. They are empty! The greatest kshatriya in the world stands, watching helplessly, while the bandits carry away most of the gold from Dwaraka and many of the Yadava women, too. Arjuna sinks to the ground, in tears; realization dawns on him that all this is, indeed, fated. Gandhari's curse has come true with unthinkable ferocity: it is truly the end of Krishna's people.

Gathering the handful of women, children and elders that remain, Arjuna arrives in Indraprastha, where Aniruddha's son, Vajra, is crowned king of the Yadavas. Krishna's wives Rukmini, Saibya, Hymavati and Jambavati make pyres and immolate themselves. Satyabhama and some others go away into the forest to perform tapasya. They live on roots and fruit and meditate upon Krishna. They climb past Himalaya and begin living in the sacred place called Kalpa. Finally, they all attain moksha.

Arjuna does not stay even a day, but rides away from that city. He fears he will lose his mind for the grief that ravages him. Something draws him inexorably to his grandfather Vyasa's ashrama. Glazed-eyed, his chest heaving, tears streaming down his face, he comes before the serene maharishi.

Vyasa says, "Welcome. Why are you so stricken? Or has someone sprinkled water on your face? Have you slept with a woman during her period? Have you killed a brahmana? Has someone vanquished you in battle? Tell me what ails you, if, of course, there is no harm in your telling me."

"Gandhari's curse has come true," says the Pandava dully. "Krishna and Balarama are dead, all the Yadavas are killed. Oh, Muni, how can I go on living, after what I have seen? I lit Krishna's pyre with my own hands. And once I would have believed the seas had dried up or the mountains had fallen into them,

but not that he could die.”

Vyasa says simply, “Arjuna, it is time for you to leave the world as well. There is no peace or purpose in it for you or your brothers, any more. You have accomplished everything you were born for.”

Arjuna tells him about the bandits, known as the Abhiras: how he could hardly string the Gandiva, or remember a mantra for the astras, how his quivers were empty.

Vyasa says, “You have no further need of the devastras, the Gandiva or the quivers. You must seek Devaloka now. Leave this world of sorrow behind you, your time in it is over.”

They sit together in rich silence, for a while, as the Pandava absorbs what Vyasa said. In that mystic silence, the warrior fancies he hears his Krishna’s voice calling him, blithely as ever, from another world. Arjuna takes his grandfather’s blessing, prostrating himself at his feet, taking the padadhuli from them and he rides slowly back to Hastinapura.

Arjuna walks into the Kuru sabha. He looks at Yudhishtira’s face and cannot say a word, but falls unconscious at his brother’s feet.

BOOK SEVENTEEN

MAHAPRASTHANIKA PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya*!

ONE

THE FINAL JOURNEY

They revive Arjuna with scented water. Haltingly, often breaking down, he tells his brothers everything that had happened. He tells them about the carnage at Prabhasa: how Satyaki, Balarama and Krishna had died and how he had lit Krishna's pyre. He tells them about the women and the bandits and finally Yudhishtira whispers, "It is Gandhari's curse come true, in every detail."

Arjuna tells them how he had dreamt of Krishna and the strange things his cousin said to him in the dream. The Pandavas are too shocked to even cry; it is as if their own lives died within them when they heard Krishna was dead. Yudhishtira, Bheema and the twins have already made plans while Arjuna was away.

Yudhishtira says, "There is no reason for us to live any longer. We always belonged to Krishna: we learnt how deeply during the war. We have decided we will crown Parikshita king in Hastinapura and leave this world."

Arjuna murmurs, "I agree. Finally, time is the only victor."

Arrangements have already been made; within days, Parikshita is crowned king of the Kurus in the palace in Hastinapura. Yuyutsu is to be the new king's guardian and advisor and Acharya Kripa, old as he is, will remain with his sishya, at least until the prince grows accustomed to the kingship. The Pandavas are ready to set out on their final journey, from which they will not return.

On the momentous day, Yudhishtira and his brothers appear on the palace steps wearing tree-bark and deerskin. Draupadi is with them and she has put away her silks and jewelry. She is also clad in valkala and soft animal hide. The people fill the streets in sorrow at the news and a cry goes up when the Pandavas emerge. But when the crowd sees the luster upon Pandu's sons and their queen, it falls silent. Powerful grace enfolds the brothers and their Panchali.

The people part, in a wave, to let them through. Blessing them, asking them to be loyal to Parikshita, the Pandavas and Draupadi walk away from the city of their fathers for the last time. As they leave the city-gates, an unusual companion attaches himself to them. A little brown dog appears out of nowhere and follows at Yudhishtira's heels, making them a party of seven. When they talk to him, wondering to whom he belongs, he turns soulful eyes up at them and wags his tail. Draupadi says, "Oh, he is so friendly. Let him come with us if he wants."

They travel south first and arrive at the place where, just a few days ago, magical Dwaraka thrust its crystal towers at the sky from the waves. Now, a calm sea stretches away to the horizon on every side and no trace remains of the marine city. But subtle visions reach out to the sons of Pandu from the jade and plumbless depths. Memories inundate them, particularly memories of a dark face and its inscrutable, always smiling, black eyes. They hear his voice woven into the surf and the mourning wind, which cries out his name endlessly.

As they stand there, a blazing Deva appears before them. Agni says to Arjuna, “You have no need any more of the Gandiva and the quivers I gave you. Give them back to the Lord of the ocean.”

Agni vanishes as abruptly as he came. Full of grief, for he is parting from friends with whom he had passed through the valley of death, Arjuna sets his weapons down on the white sand. His hands folded, he walks solemnly around them in pradakshina. He strokes them with his fingers, kisses them and casts his bow and quivers out into the smoky sea. There is a flash of light when they strike the waves; then they are gone. Varuna receives them again, as Arjuna stands forlorn, the wind blowing tears from his eyes.

It is told Varuna comes to them in an illustrious form and takes the sons of Pandu below his waves, to the city of Dwaraka on his ocean bed. Vivid schools of fish now swim in her streets, where she waits for the ages to turn slowly round and for the Dark One to be born into the world again. So she can rise once more to be his home on earth. After they pay homage to Krishna’s palace, Varuna brings them ashore and now they turn north.

With the brown dog always at their heels, Draupadi and her husbands cross the plains of Bharatavarsha and arrive at the Himalaya. They mean literally to climb into heaven! Climbing for months on feet light as air, their punya their strength, they cross a northern desert of sand beyond the Himalaya and arrive on the white slopes of majestic Meru, mountain at the heart of the earth, from which the continents unfurl like petals from a calyx. With fervent prayers, they climb higher and higher, through breathless passes, along paths hardly as wide as their feet and the mountain falling sheerly away below them. Clinging to smooth rock faces, they climb on, with Panchali between them.

Suddenly, Draupadi slips and, before any of her husbands can catch her, she falls off the slender trail they are on, plunges to her death thousands of feet below. The cries of the others echo off glacial gorges.

Bheema turns to Yudhishtira in anguish, “My lord, she was sinless all her life. Why has she died like this?”

Yudhishtira appears unmoved. Calmly, he says, “Though we were all her husbands, in her heart, she always loved Arjuna more than any of us¹. Except for that, she was pure: which is why she could climb this far. That was her only sin, but it took her down.”

They climb on and then Sahadeva loses his footing and falls to his death. Again, Bheema asks Yudhishtira why he fell, when he was always so selfless. Yudhishtira says grimly, “He was proud of his intelligence, that was his sin.”

On they climb and a blizzard howls across the icy precipices. It blows Nakula away. Yudhishtira says, “He thought he was the most handsome man on earth and so he died.”

After a while, Arjuna lies down on the very path and breathes no more. Bheema cries, “Arjuna never told a lie, not even in jest! How has he died?”

“He boasted that he would kill all his enemies in a day, but did not keep his word. He was proud of his archery and his pride killed him.”

Just they two climb on. Then Bheema feels his head spin viciously. He cries, “What have I done, my brother?”

Yudhishtira answers, “You ate too much and you bragged about your strength, my Bheema. That will cost you your life.”

Bheema falls to his death. Now it is only Yudhishtira and the sure-footed, cheerful brown dog who climb on. Yudhishtira walks blindly, for he can hardly see anything around him any more. This is no longer the mountain of the earth; he is sure he has climbed into heaven. He comes into a place full of unearthly brightness. He sees a supernal chariot fly down before him. A radiant Deva rides in that vimana. Indra says, “Yudhishtira, I have come to take you to swarga.”

“My lord, my brothers and my wife have fallen by the way. I do not want to go to swarga without them.”

“They have abandoned their mortal bodies and are already in heaven. But you, O king of dharma, shall enter the realm of the immortals in your human body!”

Yudhishtira says, “If you assure me I will meet them there, I will go with you.” He pauses shyly, then, “But this dog has followed me all the way from Hastinapura. I beg you, let me bring him with me.

Indra, lord of light, laughs. “Do you know what you are saying, Pandava? You are being offered immortality. You will be equal to the Gods and you want to bring a dog with you! You are the most fortunate man that ever lived in the

world. Don't ruin your fortune with this foolishness. There is no place in swarga for a dog. Leave the beast and come with me. Come, Yudhishtira, no blame will attach to you."

"The dog has shared my journey, he shared my grief. He loves me and is loyal to me. I cannot abandon him now."

Indra says angrily, "You are still full of attachment. You have arrived at heaven's threshold and you are being stubborn. Leave the dog, I cannot have him in my vimana."

Yudhishtira says, "All my punya will perish if I abandon this dog now. He is dependent on me, I cannot leave him. It would be a worse sin than killing a brahmana."

"You left your brothers and your queen. Does the dog mean more to you than they did?"

"My brothers and my wife were dead when I left them. I could do nothing for them any more. The dog is alive and he is helpless. I cannot abandon him. I will not come to swarga, unless he comes with me."

There is the strangest smile on Indra's face now, as he gazes past Yudhishtira. The Pandava turns his head and cries out. The furry brown dog has vanished: Yudhishtira's father, Dharma Deva, stands in its place. The astonished Pandava folds his hands to his sire. "My lord!" he breathes.

Dharma says, "There is no other king like you on earth or in heaven, my son, none as compassionate. I tried you once in the Dwaitavana and you asked for Nakula's life to be restored. Now I have tested you again and you have earned heaven for yourself with your mercy."

Numberless presences have gathered above that mountain, great spirits come to see the first mortal man who ever gained Devaloka in his human body.

Yudhishtira climbs into Indra's vimana and they flash away from the world, quickly as light. The sky parts like a blue sea and they break through its veil to the realms on the other side: wonder everywhere, light everywhere, grandeur and beauty past describing.

Indra says, "Look, Yudhishtira, every star you saw from the earth is a separate mandala of the Devas."

At the heart of ineffable legend, they arrive in fabled Amravati, the deathless city. The Lord of the Devas brings Yudhishtira into the Sudharma, his incomparable sabha. The great kings of the ages all have thrones in that court.

Indra says, “Your ancestors are all here, Yudhishtira, kings who made time fragrant with their dharma. You are one of them now, your fame is eternal.”

Yudhishtira looks around him. “I don’t see my brothers here, my lord. I don’t see my queen. I beg you, take me to them. I have no use for all this glory, if Panchali and my brothers are not with me.”

Indra says, “Stay here with us. You have earned your place in heaven with your dharma. This is not the earth any more; you must leave your worldly attachments behind you. Forget about your wife and your brothers, that life is past. They cannot hope to gain these heights, Yudhishtira, every man is given only what he deserves. You will be happy with us here, forget the past.”

Yudhishtira hardly hears him. His eyes seek his brothers everywhere in the sabha. He does not see them and the Pandava says, “I realize what an honor you bestow on me. But I cannot stay here, without my Bheema, my Arjuna, my Nakula and Sahadeva and my dear Panchali. Where are my sons, Lord, whom Aswatthama killed? I beg you, take me to those whom I love!”

Then, Yudhishtira grows very still. Seated before him on a lofty throne, with a smile on his face, he sees Duryodhana.

BOOK EIGHTEEN

SWARGAROHANIKA PARVA

AUM, I bow down to Narayana, the most exalted Nara and to the Devi Saraswathi and say *Jaya!*

ONE

THE LAW OF HEAVEN

Among kings of yore who enriched the earth with their noble lives, Duryodhana sits in Indra's sabha on a jeweled throne. The Kaurava is as majestic as any of the other kshatriyas.

Yudhishtira cannot contain himself. "How is Duryodhana here in your court of dharma? He caused the deaths of millions. He destroyed kshatriya kind with his greed. This man had Draupadi dragged into the Kuru sabha by her hair and tried to strip her naked. There is no sinner like him in heaven or earth. I cannot bear to be in the same place as him, not for a moment!"

Narada is in the Sudharma and he says to Yudhishtira, "Ah, don't say that! This is swarga. Before you enter here, you must forget your old enmities. Listen to me, Pandava, all these kings of men love your cousin. He died like a kshatriya, offering his body as libation in the fire of war and they love him for that. He died bravely, in agony and his death purified him. Moreover, he was a just king when he ruled. He was fearless and generous. Pandava, the laws of heaven differ from the laws of the earth.

Don't judge Duryodhana anymore. He was forgiven everything when he died and he died in a most holy place. Balarama said he would find Devaloka and his mother Gandhari was a bhakta. You must leave your anger behind you, Yudhishtira, there is no place for enmity here."

Yudhishtira stands trembling. "I know nothing of the laws of Devaloka, but I wonder why I don't see my brothers here. If Duryodhana deserves to be here, what about them? They were all great men, who never strayed from the path of truth. Where are they now? Where is my noblest brother Karna?

Where are Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna? Where are all the kshatriyas who laid down their lives for me? Where is my child Abhimanyu? Where is Krishna? Where is my mother Kunti? Where are Shikhandi, Virata and Drupada, where is my queen Draupadi? I beg you, my lords, take me to my brothers. I want to live in the place where they are, wherever it is. I don't understand the dharma of heaven, I want to be with my brothers!"

Yudhishtira's voice has risen in despair. Indra sighs, "Very well, then, let Yudhishtira be taken to where his brothers are."

The king of the Devas summons an attendant and Yudhishtira follows that

bright servitor out of the Sudharma. They hardly walk a short way, when suddenly they tread a sinister trail. This path snakes on, interminably and Indra's servant walks briskly along it. A glowing blackness engulfs them. The air is still, breathless; a fetid smell hangs heavily. On both sides, they hear groans and screams of souls in torment. In the gloom, Yudhishtira dimly sees the monstrous forms of demons: some entwine horribly; others are dismembered or headless and some have mouths like needles. Corpses are strewn everywhere, hideously disemboweled, entrails hanging out, smeared with fat and blood, their stink intolerable. A thousand human hands reach out to them, in agony.

Everywhere they hear sobbing and the gnashing of teeth. Weird howls ring out, now and again and at times serpents slither across the narrow path. Sulfurous pools bubble beside the eerie trail and there are living creatures in them: burning slowly, never dying, suffering endlessly. With every step they take, the sights, smells and sounds grow worse and the heat becomes unbearable.

Soon, Yudhishtira cries, "This is an infernal place! Which God rules this part of Devaloka? Ah, where are my brothers?"

Indra's servant replies, "This path leads to your brothers; but we will turn back, if you cannot bear it."

The stench is intolerable. Yudhishtira gags. The sights around them are so vile he cannot look at them and he wants to shut his ears for the dreadful sounds that fill the darkness. The heat begins to steam the skin away from his arms and face. Steadfast as he is, the Pandava cannot go any further into that hell.

He stops and says, "Friend, I cannot stand this place any more. Let us turn back. How far did Lord Indra tell you to bring me?"

The man smiles, "Only as far as you could go."

Then, many voices wail dismally out of the darkness. "Yudhishtira, don't leave us!"

"Don't go, Yudhishtira!"

"Take pity on us, stay a while!"

"Your presence soothes us like a soft breeze of heaven; don't leave!"

"Just a few moments, stay a few moments more!"

Yudhishtira's hair stands on end: the voices are familiar! He cries, "Who calls out to me? Why are you in this naraka?"

All together, the voices reply.

“I am Karna.”

“I am Bheema.”

“Arjuna.”

“Nakula.”

“Sahadeva.”

“This is I, Draupadi.”

“I am Dhrishtadyumna.”

“I am Satyaki.”

All the others he loved, who had fought and died for him, call out to him.

Yudhishtira cries, “My sinless brothers, my Panchali and my friends are all in hell, while Duryodhana sits on a crystal throne in the Sudharma! Am I dreaming? Surely, this is a nightmare from which I will awaken.”

Again, the piteous voices call out, begging him to stay with them just a little longer, ah, his presence soothed their torment. Tears in his eyes, Yudhishtira turns to the divine servitor who brought him here, “Friend, go back to Indra and tell him I will remain with my brothers. They say that my presence soothes their anguish.”

The man bows and leaves Yudhishtira alone. The darkness, the purulence, the heat and the terror of that hell are all magnified, when he is alone. The voices cry out more plaintively. Yudhishtira sits on the path, sweating, wondering how long he can endure it. He has been there for an hour, when there is a flash of light, then another, another and more. Indra stands before Yudhishtira, the king of heaven come with his host. In a moment, the darkness, the pestilential vapors, the scathing heat, the sulfur pits, the demons, all vanish. No more groans and screams bruise the air. Instead, it is sweet and pure and that place is full of light and living silence. A fragrant breeze blows, plucking at Yudhishtira’s face. He stands blinking in the soft lambency of Devaloka.

Indra says to him, “Now you have earned swarga for yourself. The law of heaven is that every king must pass through hell to purify himself. You experienced naraka briefly, to atone for your one sin on earth. Yudhishtira, you deceived your guru Drona on Kurukshetra. It was your lie that made him put down his weapons and then Dhrishtadyumna killed him. You have paid for that sin now. Forget what you saw, it was an illusion. Come with us.”

Yudhishtira stands, hands folded before the effulgent Gods. He murmurs,

“My brothers?”

“Your brothers are already in swarga! With them, are all the kings who fought for you. They, too, served a brief time in hell for their sins and were purified. You say you do not understand the law of Devaloka. Let me tell you what it is. If a man’s sins outweigh his punya, then he comes straight into heaven when he dies. When his punya is exhausted, he sinks into hell to suffer for his sins. But if a soul’s virtue exceeds his sins, then he pays first for his crimes and then comes into swarga forever.

Your brothers are not here, Yudhishtira. Come with me, I will show you where they are.”

Yudhishtira’s father, the Lord Dharma, appears before him again. Blessing his son, he says, “This was the third trial, the last one. Nothing could induce you to leave the path of truth; nothing could quell your love for your brothers. Come to those whom you love so much.”

The Devas bring Yudhishtira to the banks of the Ganga, flowing through heaven in her celestial form. The Pandava bathes in her waters of light and she takes his mortal body from him, like a worn set of clothes. He rises in glory, a king of Devaloka. With Indra and the others, Yudhishtira comes back to Amravati, to its incomparable sabha. First of all, he sees Krishna on the loftiest throne, with Arjuna beside him and all the Yadavas around them. They rise to receive Yudhishtira.

Yudhishtira sees his brother Karna sitting among the twelve Adityas, all sons of Surya. He sees his brother Bheema, his body a swirling air; he sits amidst the Maruts, who are Vayu’s magnificent people. Nakula and Sahadeva are with their fathers, the brilliant Aswin twins. Then, sweeping the sabha, Yudhishtira’s gaze finds Draupadi. She wears a garland of undying lotuses and she is a great flame in that court; all her sons surround her. Her brother Dhrishtadyumna sits not far from her, with rutilant Agni, the Fire God: their father. Yudhishtira sees Abhimanyu, seated beside the glowing Moon, luminous Soma Deva. The Pandava sees Bheeshma among the Vasus and Drona at Brihaspati’s side. He sees his uncle Vidura, now a lord of heaven beside Dharma Deva. In joy, he sees his father Pandu and Kunti and Madri¹.

His brothers rise and come to welcome Yudhishtira. Karna also rises; and with them comes another familiar figure, his body luculent, kindness and grace in his eyes and his face wreathed in a smile. It is Duryodhana, who is also a king in Devaloka. Now Yudhishtira feels no twinge of resentment and embraces his cousin just as he does his brothers.

Indra, Lord of the Devas, presents Yudhishtira, the Pandava, in his sabha in Devaloka: Yudhishtira who is Dharma's son and the very soul of truth.

PHALASRUTI

Dark Krishna was the eighth Avatara of the Lord Vishnu, who lies upon eternal waters. He was born into the world to cleanse it of the tide of evil that darkened the age. He came to establish dharma on earth again. The Devas Indra, Vayu, Dharma and the Aswins were also born into the world, in amsa, as the sons of Pandu: to fight at Krishna's side. The earth was purified because these Gods walked upon her. And at the war on the cusp of the ages, the seed of dharma was sown in holy ground made fertile by the blood of the kshatriya.

Once their lives' purpose was accomplished, the Pandavas left the world and were absorbed again into their fathers in heaven, the Lords of light. Most of all, the earth was enriched forever that blue Krishna walked upon her for a brief human life.

The legend of the Pandavas, the Mahabharata, the tale of the war on the crack of two yugas, is an immortal story. As long as the earth lives, as long as the sun and moon light the sky and there is even a spark of goodness in men's hearts, this legend of the sons of Pandu will be told in the world. It is a sacred epic, a tale of truth and whoever reads or hears it will have their sins washed away and their hearts made pure. They will finally come to the blessed realm of Mahavishnu, who lies on the serpent, Anantasesha, upon the Kshirasagara, ocean of eternity and of bliss.

AUM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI! AUM SHANTIHI AUM!

APPENDIX

BOOK 5. Udyoga Parva.

1. The names of some of those kings: Hardikya, Ahuka, the king of the Mallas, Rochamana, Bri-hanta, Senabindu, Baahlika, Mudrakesa, Suparshva, Subahu, Paurava, the kings of the Sakas, the Pahlavas and the Daradas, Surari, Nadija, Karnavest, Nila, Viradharman, Durjaya, Dantavakra, Rukmi, Janamejaya, Ashada, Vayuvega, Purvapali, Bhooritejas, Devaka, Ekalaya and his sons, the Krausha king, Kshemamurti, the Kamboja and Richaka kings, the kings of Kashi, the Sindhu, the son of Kratha, the mountain kings, Jananki, Susarman, Maniman, Potimatsyaka, Dhrishtaketu, the Pansu king, Paundra, Dandadhara, Brihatsena, Aparajita, Srenimat, Nishada, Vasumat, Brihadbala, Bahu, Samudrasena, Uddhava, Kshemaka, Vatadhana, Srutayus, Dridayus, the son of Shalva, the Kalinga kings and Kumara.

2. This is another incident Karna relates to describe his relationship with Duryodhana. This is from Tamil folklore.

Duryodhana and Karna are so close that Karna has access to Duryodhana's harem and his wife's inner apartments.

One day, Karna is playing dice with Duryodhana's wife and she is losing to him. Suddenly, Duryodhana enters the private chamber. Karna has his back to the door, while Duryodhana's wife is facing it...She sees Duryodhana and gets up.

Karna has not seen him yet and saying, 'You can't leave just because you are losing!' pulls her wife to sit down again. Accidentally, he breaks her string of pearls.

She is embarrassed and confused, lest Duryodhana misunderstand this intimacy. She stands shaken and unsure. Duryodhana calmly comes up to them and says...the Tamil version is 'Cherkkava, Korkkava?' which means, 'Shall I join your game, or string the pearls?'

When, just before the war, Kunti begs Karna to join the Pandavas, telling him he is their brother, this is one of the stories he relates to tell her to say that he could never abandon Duryodhana, who trusted him so completely and was closer than any brother to him.

BOOK 6. Bheeshma Parva.

1. Vyasa describes some of the sinister omens seen, which presage an unthinkable slaughter and the end of kshatriya kind. He is speaking to Dhritarashtra.

‘Great will be the slaughter, O King. I see so many dreadful omens. Hawks, vultures, cranes, crows and herons, swarm in the branches of the trees around Kurukshetra, delighted at the prospect of war. Carnivores of every kind teem in the woods and will feast upon the flesh of elephants and horses. Other birds of ill omen wheel in dense flocks in the sky, drifting south and utter terrible cries.

At dawn and dusk, I see the face of the sun covered with the headless trunks of fighting men. At both sandhyas cloud of three colors, shaped like maces, cover the sun. At night, the moon and the stars seem to take fire and burn above. Even on the fifteenth night of the bright fortnight of Kartika, the full moon was either invisible or the color of fire and the sky the hue of a lotus.

All night I hear the savage cries of fighting boars and cats. Surely, numberless heroes will perish during the war.

In temples, the idols of the Gods and Goddesses laugh dementedly at times, then tremble. Often, the vomit blood, sweats, or even fall down. Without being beaten, great drums sound of themselves; without horses being yoked to them kshatriyas; chariots move on their own.

At dawn, thick insect swarms cover the morning sky, obscuring the first light. Strange clouds appear suddenly and rain down showers of dust and pieces of flesh. The peerless Arundhati, renowned for her dharma, flies ahead of her lord Vasishta. Saturn, Shanaishchara afflicts the asterism Rohini. The deer upon the face of the Moon has strayed from his customary place. Thunder echoes in a perfectly clear sky and lightning flashes.

The cows and horses in their sheds and stables cry all day and night. Cows bring forth baby donkeys. Trees in the forest are laden with unseasonable flowers and fruit. Lotuses and lilies grow from trees! Women, both pregnant and not, give birth to hideous children, monsters. Animals, too, bring forth dreadful offspring—some with three horns, some four-eyed, some with two heads or five legs, some with two tails or phalluses. All these are born with gaping mouths, uttering profane cries.

Crested horses are being born, many of them with just three legs, but horned.

In your city, Dhritarashtra, the wives of brahmanas are giving birth to

eaglets and peacocks. The mare brings forth the calf of the cow and the bitch brings forth jackals or the cockerel. Deer and parrots give ceaseless throat to the weirdest cries and songs.

Some women give birth to four and five daughters, together and these children sing, laugh and dance as soon as they are born. All those beyond the pale of the four varnas are celebrant—the scavengers and the lowest of the lowborn, as if in delight at the age of chaos that is dawning over the world.

The smallest infants attack one another with wooden clubs and are full of violence: as if Death sits on their hearts. Powerful winds blow without pause and earthquakes are felt in every kingdom. Taking his position between Chitra and Swati, Rahu creeps upon the Sun and the white planet Ketu, mixing fire and smoke, having passed the constellation of Chitra, stays where he is and attacks Jye-shta, which is sacred to Indra. A fiery comet, big as a planet, has risen to afflict Pushyami. Mars wheels at Magha and Jupiter toward Shravana. The Sun's child Saturn approaches the sign Bhaga, afflicting it. Shukra glitters brilliantly, rising toward Purva Bhadra and gazes across at Uttara Bhadra, wheeling in his direction.

Dhruva blazes, no longer stationary but spinning to the right. The Sun and Moon both afflict Rohini. Red Mars, Mangala, aligns himself with Shravana and Brihaspati, Jupiter, there.

Our sacred earth has burst forth in a plethora of crops of every season. Every stalk of barley has five ears and each one of paddy, a hundred. Cows yield only blood, when milked after the calves have drunk.

Bows and swords burn with uncanny light, without being touched—as if they already behold the war that is before them. The color of water, weapons and armor is of fire. Ah, a great massacre will happen and the earth will flow a frothing river of blood with the standards of kshatriyas for its rafts.

The mandala of the Saptarishi is dim in the sky, as if in deep sorrow. For a whole year Saturn and Jupiter have entered Vishaka and stood unmoving there. Extraordinary eclipses, of both Sun and Moon and bizarre lunation, out of time—3 full moons in a fortnight—have been seen, frequently. The four quarters and the intermediate directions all seem inauspicious, with filthy clouds of dust risen.

Some midnight clouds appear in a moment and pour down rains of blood. Rivers run blood mingled with water in their banks. Rakshasas drink from them and are not sated. Deep natural wells bellow like bulls.

Ferocious and savage Rahu constantly afflicts Kritika, too. What else but a

great slaughtering can all these omens portend? The rishis all say the Earth will drink the blood of thousands of kings and their hosts.

Kailasa and Mandara echo with strange explosions and swollen by submarine quakes, the oceans appear ready to break their shores and sweep across the continents. The howling winds that blow bear tiny pebbles, like hails of darts. Lightning strikes trees, great and small, in exceptional numbers, reducing them to pillars of ash.

Sacrificial fires burn blue, crimson or yellow, when libations are poured into them. Their flames bend to the left, give off a fecal stench and loud reports, sending sparks flying. Human senses seem to decay, change their very nature—touch, smell and taste have become what they were not.’ 2. Here is the hymn with which Arjuna worships the Goddess Durga, before his moment of crisis on Kurukshetra, before the war begins.

Arjuna said, ‘I bow to you, Queen of yogins, who are one with the Brahman, who dwell in the Mandara forest, who are free from ageing and decay, O Kali, consort of the Kapalin, you who are black and red.

I worship you, who bless your bhaktas, O Mahakaali, wife of the destroyer of the universe, proud one, who save from every danger and who own every auspicious quality.

You sprang from the Kata race, you that deserve the highest worship, fierce One, bestower of victory, O Victory personified, with the banner of peacock plumes, wearing every invaluable ornament, who bear the dreadful spear, with the sword and the shield, who are the younger sister of the chief of the cowherds, Eldest, who love quaffing the blood of the buffalo, born in the race of Kushika, who wear yellow robes.

I worship you that have devoured demons, by assuming a great wolf’s face. I bow to you who love battle! O Uma, Shakambhari, you are white, Gauri, then black again, Kali. You slew the Demon Kaitabha. You have yellow eyes, you have many eyes, you have eyes the color of smoke and I worship you.

You are the Vedas, the Srutis and the highest dharma. You bless brahmanas that perform yagnas. You know the past and you dwell in all the sacred shrines built to you in every city in Jambudwipa. Ah, I adore you, Devi! Among sciences, you are the science of the Brahman and you are the sleep of beings, from which there is no waking.

Mother of Skanda, you own the six loftiest attributes. Durga, who dwell everywhere, in the most accessible places, you are Swaha, Swadha, Kala,

Kashta, Saraswathi, Savitri mother of the Vedas. You are the Vedanta, too.

With my heart clear, I bow again to you, O incomparable Goddess—I beg you let victory always ride with me during this war. You dwell in the most difficult and dangerous places, where there is fear, in the homes of your bhaktas and in patala. You are she that always slays the danavas.

You are unconsciousness, sleep, illusion, modesty and everything that is beautiful in all creatures. You are the twilight, you are the day, you are Savitri and you are the Mother. You are contentment, you are growth and you are light. You support the Sun and the Moon and make them shine. You are the prosperity of the prosperous. The siddhas and charanas seek and find you in dhyana.’

The boon-giving Devi Durga appeared before Arjuna and blessed him, ‘Soon you will vanquish your enemies, Pandava. Invincible one, Narayana himself is your sarathy and not Indra himself can defeat you in battle.’

And the glorious Mother vanished.

BOOK 7. Drona Parva.

1. There is a colorful description of some of the kings’ chariot horses.

‘Bheema’s chariot is drawn by horses dappled like the antelope. Satyaki has silvery steeds, Yudha-manyu has varicoloured horses, Dhrishtadyumna’s are the hue of pigeons, covered by golden mail, his son Kshatradharman’s are red, Shikhandi’s son Kshatradeva’s are the color of lotus leaves and have clear white eyes. Born in the land of the Valhikas, they are covered in rich crimson silk.

Nakula’s horses are of the Kamboja breed; they wear plumes with feathers of the green parrot. Uttamaujas rides against Drona in his chariot drawn by horses that are the color of thunderheads. Sahadeva’s horses are of many hues, Yudhishtira’s are ivory-colored, with black manes; Virata’s horses are pale red, like the trumpet-flower and are exceptionally beautiful.

Uttara Kumara’s horses are yellow; the five Kekaya brothers have deep red steeds. Shikhandi’s are gandharva horses, given him by Tumburu. Sishupala has mottled horses, again like the antelope, Dhrishtaketu’s are of different colors. Brihadkshatra’s horses are of the Sindhu breed, the color of the smoke of burning straw.

Covered in golden armor, their skins the hue of red silk, Senabindu’s has quiet swift horses. The young and delicate prince of the Kasis, powerful warrior, has horses the hue of cranes. Like his father Yudhishtira, Prativindhya has white horses with black manes, swift as the mind and obedient to their sarathy’s very

thought. Bheema's son Sutasoma, radiant as a thousand moons, has wheatish colored horses, which he got from Soma Deva. Nakula's son Sataneeka's horses are the hue of the sala flower, or the morning sun. Sahadeva's son, Srutakarman's, chariot is pulled by steeds the hue of a peacock's throat, while Arjuna son Srutakirti has horses the color of kingfishers.

Tawny horses bear Abhimanyu into war. Yuyutsu's horses are gigantic. Vardhakshemi's horses are plump, richly adorned and the color of the dried paddy stalk. The young Sauchitti's horses have black legs, golden breastplates and are exceptionally obedient. Srenimat's steeds are also the hue of red silk, as are those of Satyadhriti.

Chekitana's horses are like tawny silk. Arjuna's maternal uncle Kuntibhoja has rainbow-hued horses, while Rochamana's horses resemble the star-spangled night sky. The Panchala prince Singhasena, son of Gopati, has steeds like the red deer, with streaks of white and Janamejaya's horses are the color of mustard flowers. Quick as light, huge and deep blue, with backs the color of curd, are the horses of Drupada and they are decked with chains of gold.

Bold and with beautiful heads, are the horses of Dandadhara; they are as white as the stalks of reeds and splendid as the lotus or the firmament. Vyaghradatta's horses are light brown, their backs a mousy hue and they hold their necks up more proudly than perhaps any other steeds. The Panchala prince Sudhanwan had horses with dark speckles.

Chitrayudha's horses are fierce and beautiful, having the color of the indragopakas, with variegated patches. The Kosala prince Sukshatra's chariot is yoked to horses whose bellies are the color of the chakravaka. Long-legged and large, many-colored and most docile are the chariot-horses of Satyadhriti. Shukla's armor, standard, bow and horses are all the same white hue.

The ferociously energetic Chandrasena, son of Samudrasena, rides with steeds born on the sea-coast, white as the moon. Saiva's exquisite ratha is drawn by horses of the color of the blue lotus, adorned with golden mail and beautiful wreaths of flowers. Rathasena tilts into battle in his chariot yoked to pedigreed horses the color of kalaya flowers, with red and white streaks.

Chitrayudha has steeds of superior bloodlines, their hue of kimsuka flowers. Nila has blue horses, armor, flag and weapons. Chitra's horses are extravagantly bejeweled. Rochamana's son, Hema-varna's, horses are also the color of the lotus. The hue of the hen's egg, their testicles white and their spines the color of reeds, are the steeds of Dandaketu.

The Pandya king, Sarangadhwaja, had horses the hue of the rays of the full moon yoked. A hundred and forty-thousand warriors that followed this king owned horses the hue of the atrusa flower.

Strange and varicoloured horses bore the rakshasas of Ghatotkacha. Red-eyed Brihatna's chariot was drawn by outsized horses of the Aratta breed. This king was a devotee of Yudhishtira and had come to fight for him, against the wishes of his people and his ilk and abandoning all else he owned. The Prabhadrakas had steeds of many amazing colors. Dhrishtadyumna favored these kshatriyas greatly.'

Now for the flags and standards of some of the heroes:

'A black deer-skin waving above it, Drona's standard excelled those of all the enemy. It bore a lovely water-pot. Bheema's splendid standard bore a huge silver lion, its eyes of lapis. The great Yudhishtira's banner had the golden moon, with the planets around it and it was luminous indeed. Two kettle-drums, named Nanda and Upananda were tied to it and had sticks attached that beat them with the wind.

Nakula has an eight-legged Sarabha upon his banner, to terrify his foes; the mythic creature's back is made of gold. Sahadeva's flag bears a silver swan, which magically strikes fear into his adversaries' hearts. The standards of the five sons of Panchali bore the images of Dharma, Vayu, Indra and the two Aswins.

Abhimanyu's banner bears a peacock, the hue of molten gold. When he rode in his chariot, it flew a flag of a bright vulture and his horses could fly anywhere at his will, even as those of Ravana of old.'

And later:

'The maharathikas had standards that blazed like fire, for they were often made of gold like Meru, or adorned with golden emblems; also, they were of many resonant colors—all those of the rainbow. Flying in the wind, they were as graceful as dancing courtesans.

Of course, Arjuna's standard bears Hanuman himself. Aswatthama's flag was bright as a rising sun and had a lion's tail above it. Karna flew a banner with a golden 'elephant rope'; wonderfully splendid, it seemed to dance upon his flagstaff and was adorned with gold and garlands. Kripa had a fighting bull on his banner, awesome as Nandiswara.

Vrishasena flies a peacock, as magnificent as Skanda's, as well as a plowshare. Shalya of the Madras flew the image of a Devi as lovely as the Goddess of the field, who creates every seed of the harvest. He also flew a

massive silver elephant, with peacocks surrounding it. A silver boar adorns the standard of the Sindhu king and it glitters like crystal.

Somadatta's son flies a yupastamba, a sacrificial stake, on his banner—one as resplendent as the stamba at a Rajasuya yagna. On his golden banner, Duryodhana flew an elephant as magnificent as Airavata, encrusted with precious jewels all over.'

As for weapons:

'Yudhishtira's bow was called the Mahendra and Bheema's the Vayavya. Arjuna wielded the Gandiva, which Brahma once bore to protect the three worlds. Nakula wielded the Vaishnavi and Sahadeva the Aswan.

Ghatotkacha came into battle with the unearthly bow, the Paulastya. Draupadi's five sons wielded the Raudra, the Agneya, the Kauverya, the Yamya and the Girisa.

It is also told (in the Ganguli translation) that Bheema obtained the Raudra and that it was Sub-hadra's son Abhimanyu who had it from his uncle.'

3. Aswatthama asks in despair, 'Why did my Agneyastra not slay Arjuna and Krishna?'

Vyasa replies, 'Narayana is older than the oldest times. He, the Creator of the universe, once incarnated himself as Dharma's son. He sat upon the Himalaya in the most awesome tapasya. Splendid as fire or the sun, he stood upon the mountain, with his arms raised heavenward. For sixty-six thousand years, he stood without eating or drinking, living only on the air he breathed. His eyes shone like the petals of the mystic lotus.

His energy spread through the earth. Then he stood in another, sterner, penance for twice that time and now his great energy filled the space between heaven and earth. With this tapasya, Narayana Muni shone forth like Brahma and then suddenly he saw the Master, the Origin and Guardian of the Universe, the Lord of all the Gods, the Final Deity, smaller than the smallest, bigger than the greatest, who is almost impossible to gaze upon for his splendor, who is called Rudra, the terrible One. He who is also called Hara and Sambhu wore matted jata upon his head—he who infuses life into all things, who is the primal Cause, who is irresistible and also frightful, whose wrath consumes the cosmos, whose Soul encompasses everything, whose heart is boundless, who wields the bow Pinaka and twin quivers, who wears golden armor, whose energy is infinite, who bears a huge sword, a thunderbolt, a blazing trident, a battle-axe and a mace.

The Lord Siva's eyebrows were fair, his matted locks black, he wielded a short club, he bore the crescent moon on his head, he wore a tiger-skin and snakes were the sacred threads on his ash-covered body. All sorts of strange and wonderful creatures from across the universe surrounded him, as well as goblins and ghouls, ghosts and spirits.

He is the One, the abode of yoga and dhyana, whom the eldest in the world always revere, who is water, heaven, sky, earth, sun, moon, wind and fire, who is the measure of the duration of the universe. Never do the evil-hearted obtain a vision of the Un-born One, the slayer of those that hate brahmanas, he that bestows moksha.

Only those purified of all their sins, men of dharma, ever see the Lord Siva with their mind's eye. After his long tapasya, Narayana saw the unfading One, Dharma's embodiment, the adorable One, who has the universe for his form. Vasudeva saw that final abode of ever kind of splendor, the God with the garland of asks round his neck and Narayana Muni was filled with ecstasy, which he sought to express with his understanding, his body, his heart and by words.

Narayana worshipped the Divine Siva, First cause of creation, giver of boons, the puissant One who sports with the exquisite Parvati, he that is always surrounded by bhutas and pramathas, who is the Parabrahman manifest, the essence of all causes, the One of infinite power. Prostrating before Rudra, who slew the Asura Andhaka, Narayana of the lotus eyes began to fervently hymn the blue-throated, three-eyed Lord.

“Adorable One, first of all Gods, Creator of the Prajapatis, regents of the earth, who entered the world and protected it before. All the universe, with its devas, asuras, nagas, rakshasas, pisachas, humans, birds, gandharvas, yakshas and every other creature, sprang from you.

All worship of Indra, Yama, Varuna, Kubera, the Pitrs, Tvashtri and Soma is in truth only worship of you. Form and light, sound and sky, wind and touch, taste and water, scent and earth, time, Brahma himself, the Vedas, the brahmanas, all things that move and are still have come from you.

The wise man observes the birth and the passing of all things and realizes that you are the only truth, the single unity and the sacred ground. You created two birds, Iswara and jiva, four aswaththa trees with their branches of holy words—the Vedas—, seven guardians—the five elements, the heart and the intellect—and the ten senses and their objects. You are apart from all these.

The past, the present and the future flow from you, as do the seven realms

and the universe. I am your devoted bhakta; Lord, be gracious to me. Let evil never penetrate my heart. You are unknowable, the Soul of souls. He that knows you are the seed of the stars finds the Parabrahman. Lord not all the Gods can fathom you. I am here to realize your true nature; Siva, reveal yourself to me, do not hide behind your illusion.”

Then the blue-throated Lord, the Pinakin, whom the rishis always hymn, blessed Vasudeva with the rare boons he sought, for he deserved to receive them.

Mahadeva said, “Narayana, I bless you that among men, Devas and gandharvas, you shall have untold, immeasurable power and soul. Not the gods, the asuras, the great uragas, the pisachas, gandharvas, men, rakshasas, birds, beasts, nagas, or any creature in the universe shall be able to resist you, or withstand your prowess. None among the gods or demons shall ever be able to vanquish you in battle. By my grace, not Indra’s vajra shall be able to harm you. No weapon, wet, dry, unmoving or mobile will ever cause you pain.

If you ever come to battle against me, you shall triumph!”

These were the boons that Narayana acquired from Lord Siva in another yuga. It is that Narayana who walks the earth today as Krishna.

While he performed his tapasya of old, another great muni was born from him—equal to him in every way. He was called Nara and Arjuna is none other than that Nara. These two rishis, said to be older than the eldest of the Gods, incarnate themselves into the world, from age to age, to protect dharma, when it is threatened.’

Vyasa paused, then continued, ‘You, Aswatthama, of great heart and tapasya of yore, were born yourself as an amsa of Siva—with the Lord’s own energy and wrath! In a previous life, you were as wise as a Deva. You thought of the universe as being only Siva and emaciated yourself in a fierce penance to gratify that God. You worshipped him with mantras, homa and other offerings. Siva, who is always easily pleased, granted you several boons, which you have cherished in your heart.

Your tapasya, like Nara and Narayana’s, was also superior. As they have, you, too, have adored Mahadeva in your every life, as the sacred Linga. Krishna is Rudra’s greatest bhakta, sprung from Siva himself and he worships the Linga as the root of the universe. The knowledge of the Linga is always in him and by it, he sees the identity of creation with the Brahman. He sees everything, past, present and future, the near and the remote, whole and undivided before his eyes. The devas, the rishis and the siddhas all worship Krishna because he has attained

to Siva, the highest goal of all.

Krishna is also the creator of all things; he must be worshipped. He always worships the Lord Siva and Siva has even greater adoration for him!’

The light of understanding dawned on Aswatthama’s heart and Drona’s son bowed to Siva and realized who Krishna was. Divine delight filled him and his body shone. He returned to the field of battle and asked Duryodhana to withdraw the Kuru army for the night.

The next chapter deals again with Siva. Now, the victorious Arjuna speaks to Vyasa.

‘Muni, while I was killing the enemy with storms of arrows, I always saw a blazing, refulgent figure before my chariot and my eyes. He was bright as fire and held a spear in his hands. Wherever he went, with that weapon raised, the enemy fell like flies before him, though I do not think they ever saw him. Indeed, every soldier that I seemed to kill was in fact slain by the mysterious figure. I merely followed him and loosed my arrows at those whom he had already killed.

Great Vyasa, who was that figure, to my eyes brilliant as the sun? His feet never touched the earth and he never cast his spear or pierced anyone with it—yet I saw a million sullies fly out from his single weapon.’

Vyasa replied, ‘Arjuna, you saw Siva, the First cause, from whom the Prajapatis came—Shankara, who is the embodiment of Swarga, Bhumi and Patala, the Divine Lord, who protects the universe, the Great Master, also known as Isana.

He is also Mahadeva, the greatest God, the Supreme Soul and the only true Lord, with matted jata, the home of all that is auspicious. With three eyes and mighty arms, his locks tied above his head like a crown, his body covered in skins, he is Rudra. The boon giver, sovereign of the universe, he is called Hara and Sthanu. He is the foremost of all beings, invincible, who brings joy to the worlds and the supreme monarch.

He is the first cause, the light and the refuge of the worlds and always triumphant. He is the soul and the maker and having the universe for his body, his fame is eternal and infinite. He is the master of karma. Called Sambhu, he is self-born, lord of all creatures, the source of the three times. He is yoga and the Lord of yoga, the Mahayogin. He is Sarva, all things.

The highest One, he is Paramesthin. He is the soul of knowledge and knowledge can never encompass him. He is the greatest, most munificent granter

of boons to his bhaktas.

Siva's companions are his ganas—weird and divine beings, many of them macabre and hideous to behold. Some are dwarves, some have jata, some are hairless of body and head, some have no necks, others huge bellies, others immense bodies, some are enormously strong and others have very long ears. All the ganas dress strangely indeed and have deformed faces, mouths and bent legs.

This is Siva, who went before you in battle, Arjuna, through his kindness and ancient love for you. How else would you have razed an army which Karna, Kripa and Aswatthama protected? However, the warrior, before whom Siva walks, is always triumphant. Why, the very scent of Maheswara, when he is angry, makes any enemy tremble and fall senseless on the field. For this do the Devas of heaven worship him. So, too, men of this earth that worship the Lord Siva find joy here and moksha in the hereafter.

O son of Kunti, do you also bow down to Him that is Peace, Rudra of the blue throat, terrible beyond imagining, effulgent, called Kapardin, skull-bearer, of tawny eyes, the boon—giver, the great ordainer, of red hair and perfect dharma, who is always an object of desire, who is the Purusha, who is boldness itself, who is the subtlest, who gives light, who embodies all sacred waters, who is the God of gods, who is impetuous, who is manifest, handsome, the mountain his home, who is peace, who wears valkala, golden ornaments upon his arms, who is fierce, Lord of all the directions, of the clouds and all created beings, lord of plants and trees and of kine, whose body is shrouded by the trees of the tapovana, who inspires every thought, who has the sacrificial ladle in his hand, who is ablaze, who wields the Pinaka, is Rama's self, has many forms, wears munja grass, has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, arms and legs.

0 Kaunteya, seek the protection of Umapati, who destroyed Daksha's yagna, the always cheerful Siva, whose navel is like that of a bull, who rides the bull and whose emblem is the mighty bull. He is proud as a bull; he is the lord of bulls and the bull of bulls. He has a bull on his banner, is liberal to the righteous, can be approached only by yoga, his eyes are like a bull's, his weapons superior, whose arrow is Vishnu himself, who personifies dharma, who is called Maheswara, who has a vast belly and a vast body, who sits on a leopard skin, Lord of the worlds, devoted to Brahma, who loves the brah-manas, wields the trisula, who gave his battle-axe to Parasurama.

1 place myself in the hands of this God, who wears the skin of the deer. Kubera is his friend, the greatest archers his companions, who

himself is the greatest of them all, of stern vows and immaculate austerity, whose favorite weapon is the bow, who is himself the shaft discharged from his bow, who is the bow and bowstring and the guru that teaches the use of the bow.

I bow to the God whose weapons are awesome, the foremost of all Gods. I bow to him of many forms, with myriad bowmen around him. I salute him, who consumed the Tripura, who slew the Asura Bhaga, who is the Lord of trees and men, of the divine mothers and of the spirit tribes called the ganas. He is the lord of cattle and sacrifices, of the waters, of the devas, who knocked out Surya's teeth, Hara who has a blue throat and golden hair.'

Vyasa goes on to describe some of the legends about Siva—how he destroyed Sati's father, Daksha's yagna, where Surya was devouring the main offering, when Siva knocked out his teeth. Vyasa tells how all the Devas and rishis together, who had defied Siva, could not face his wrath in battle and finally, terrified, sought his mercy and protection.

Vyasa tells of the marvelous triune cities of Mayaa Danava, the great Asura artisan and how Siva burned them, when dharma left those cities.

He continues, 'He is Rudra, Siva, Agni; he is everything and knows everything. He is Indra, Vayu, the Aswin twins and he is lightning. He is Bhava, Parjanya, Mahadeva and he is sinless. He is Soma, Isana, Surya and Varuna. He is Kala, Antaka, Mrityu and Yama. He is the day and he is the night. He is the fortnight, the month and the seasons. He is the sandhyas; he is the year.

He is Dhatri, Vidhatri, the Soul of the universe and he that does all things that happen in the universe. He is formless himself, yet all these endless forms are him. He is infinitely splendid and glorious and all the gods hymn him.

He is one, he is many; he is a hundred and a thousand. Brahmanas who know the Veda say that Siva has two forms—the terrible and the auspicious. These two forms, again, are many. The gentle forms are water, light and the moon, all that is most profoundly mysterious in all the branches of the Vedas, the Upanishads. And the Puranas and every science that deals with the Soul—all these are Maheswara. This God, Mahadeva, was never born; he always existed.

Arjuna, not if I were to speak without pausing for a thousand years, can I begin to enumerate all the attributes of Siva. He is the One who delivers those that seek him, be they afflicted by malignant planets and tainted by every dreadful sin. He grants and takes away life, health, prosperity, wealth and all the diverse objects of desire. Indra's fortune and prosperity belong to Siva, as do

those of the other devas. He is ever engaged in the welfare and detriment of men of the earth. He can do whatever he pleases, for he is the ultimate Lord. He is perfectly just; he is dharma embodied.

He pervades creation in many forms—his mouth is the ocean and the wise know that mouth assumes the form of a mare's head to drink the sacrificial libations of holy water. Siva dwells in crematorium, burning ghats and his bhaktas worship him in those places, where only the brave venture. Countless are the blazing and savage forms of the Lord Siva of which men speak and worship in this world. Countless, also, are his sacred names, each one a salvational mantra. The main names are found in the Veda, in the hymn called the Satarudriya.

The brahmanas and munis all say he is the First-born of all creatures. He is the first of the Gods, too. Vayu was born from Siva's mouth. Since Rudra created all the animals of the worlds and always loves and sports with them, he is Pasupati. His Linga is an emblem of brahmacharya. Since he always brings joy to the worlds, he is Maheswara. The Devas, rishis, gandharvas and apsaras adore the erect Linga and that pleases the God Siva as no other worship.

Being multi-formed, he is Bahurupa. He is all the worlds, hence he is Sarva. He is Dhurjjati, since his form is like that of smoke. The Gods of the cosmos, the Viswedevas, dwell inside Siva, so he is Viswarupa. He is called Tryambaka, because the Goddesses of the universe—sky, water and earth—adore and have recourse to him. Since he is always auspicious toward men, in every way, he is Siva, the Auspicious One.

He is Mahadeva, being the Great God. Since he is steadfast and everlasting, he is Sthanu. Since the light of the sun and the moon that fall onto the earth are said to be his hair, he is Vyomakesa. Finally, he destroys even Brahma, Indra, Varuna, Yama and Kubera—so he is Hara. Since he is the three times and their origin and end, he is Bhava. Kapi means the supreme one and Vrisha, the just; Siva is Vrishakapi. He is all the vital breaths of living beings and their health and sickness too.

The one that worships Siva as a Linga always finds unimaginable prosperity resulting. Half of the Lord is fierce like fire and half of him cool and gentle as the moon. Blazing with cosmic energy, he burns more brightly than all the gods do. With his burning form, he practises brahmacharya. With this apocalyptic form, he devours the universe when the time of the end comes. Because he burns, because he is fierce, powerful and devours flesh, blood and marrow, he is Rudra.

Worship Siva with the Satarudriya, Arjuna and the Lord will go before you, wherever you ride.’ Vyasa said. ‘Defeat is not for you, because Krishna is your sarathy!’

BOOK 8. Karna Parva.

1. The Devas, the Danavas, the gandharvas, the pisachas, the nagas, the rakshasas—all these took different sides in the battle between Karna and Arjuna. The sky was anxious for Karna; the earth was anxious for Arjuna, even as a mother for her son. The rivers, mountains, trees, deciduous plants and herbs took Arjuna, the Kiritin’s, side.

The asuras, yatudhanas and guhyakas were with Karna, as were ravens and other sky-rangers. All the precious gemstones and jewels, the four Vedas, the Upavedas, the Upanishads, with all their mysteries, Vasuki, Chitrasena, Takshaka and Upatakshaka, all the children of Kadru, all great serpents and nagas were for Arjuna, as were Airavata, the children of Surabhi, those of Vaisali and the bhogins.

The smaller snakes sided with Karna, while wolves, wild stags and all sorts of auspicious birds and beasts took Arjuna’s part. The Vasus, the Maruts, the Sadhyas, the Rudras, the Viswedevas, the Aswins, Agni, Indra, Soma, Vayu and the ten points of the compass—all these were for Arjuna. The Adityas were for Karna.

The vaisyas, sudras, sutas, all mixed castes, took the side of Radha’s son. All the Devas and the pitrs, with their followers, Yama, Kubera and Varuna were for Arjuna’s victory, as were the brah-manas, kshatriyas, the yagnas and the dakshinas. Pisachas, pretas, most carnivores—animal and bird—the rakshasas, all the great monsters of the deep blue sea, dogs and jackals were for Karna. The rishis, of this world and the heavens, were for the Pandava, as were the gandharvas of Tumburu.

The Devas and the great Asuras adopted opposing sides. All the celestials, or darkness and light gathered invisibly in the firmament to watch the duels of duels. Brahma was there and even Bhava, Siva in his vimana.

Indra said, ‘Let Arjuna kill Karna today!’

Surya cried hotly, ‘Let my son triumph and spill the Pandava’s blood!’

They almost battled themselves, until Brahma intervened. The three worlds trembled when Karna and Arjuna faced each other, as did the rishis, the Devas and every other creature. The Devas and the Asuras aid to Brahma, ‘Let the encounter be equal and let the universe not be destroyed by the duel between

Arjuna and Karna!’

But Indra bowed to his Sire and said, ‘You once averred that victory would always belong to the two Krishnas. Let your words not prove false today. Holy father, be pleased with me!’

At which, Brahma and Rudra both replied, ‘Be assured that Savyasachin, Arjuna, shall triumph today, for he is on the side of dharma, while Karna fights for evil.’

Brahma said, ‘Siva is for Arjuna and Krishna; how can they be defeated? Moreover, Arjuna is a master of the four kinds of astras. Krishna and he are Nara and Narayana—all the gods, the charanas and devarishis walk behind them. There is none that can vanquish them anywhere.

Yet, when Karna, that bull among men, dies, let him attain the highest worlds of bliss. Let him be equal to the Vasus and the Maruts. Vikartana’s (Surya) son is a great hero—let him be worshipped in heaven, even as Bheeshma and Drona are.’

BOOK 9. Shalya Parva.

1. Maharathika Aswatthama was like Rudra himself in battle. He had beautiful limbs, a handsome head covered with thick hair, a neck adorned with three lines as on a conch-shell, was sweet-spoken, had eyes that resembled the petals of a full-blown lotus, a face as dignified as Meru. His neck, his eyes, tread and voice were like Nandiswara’s. His arms were powerful, well-jointed, his chest broad and well-formed, he was Garuda’s equal in speed and strength, splendid as the sun’s rays, as intelligent as Shukra, as handsome as Soma. His body seemed to be made of a number of golden lotuses. His thighs were powerful and well-formed, as were his waist and hips. His hands and fingers were elegant and beautiful, as were his fingernails. Why, Brahma seemed to have made Aswatthama after collected the finest features of man in all his creation. His learning was oceanic and he bore every auspicious mark upon his person. He always vanquished his enemy with stunning swiftness, while they were helpless against his prowess.

He was a master of astras—their 4 padas and 10 angas. He was equally a master of the 4 Vedas, with all their branches and the Akhyanas. It must be remembered that Drona, who was not born of a woman and had great ascetic punya, worshipped Lord Siva for a son. He begot Aswatthama upon Kripa, who also was not born of a woman. Aswatthama is often considered an amsa of Siva and unrivalled were his beauty, his erudition and his feats.

BOOK 14. Aswamedha Parva.

1. King Janamejaya wants to know about the mysterious mongoose and Vaisampayana tells him.

‘I will tell who the blue-eyed mongoose was and how he could speak in a human voice and tongue. Once, the Rishi Jamadagni wanted to perform a yagna. His homa cow came to him and the sage milked her himself. He poured the milk into a new, pure vessel. Dharma Deva, assuming the form of Krodha, Anger, entered the vessel, for the God of dharma wanted to see how Jamadagni would react if provoked. Dharma split and spilt that milk. Jamadagni knew who had done this and evinced no annoyance.

Then, Krodha became a brahmana and appeared before the rishi. He said, ‘Greatest among all the race of Bhrigu, you have conquered me! The entire world says that the Bhrigus are known for their rage, but I find now that they lie. You have subdued me, O Mahatman and you possess the rare virtue of forgiveness. I stand before you as a supplicant, O Muni. I fear your tapasya; puissant one, be kind to me.’

Jamadagni said, ‘I have seen you, O Krodha, in your embodied form. Go where you wish, without any fear. You have not done me any injury today and I bear no grudge against you. However, the milk you spoilt was for the Pitrs. You must go before them and see what they do.’

In some terror, Anger vanished from the presence of the sage. But the manes cursed him to become a mongoose. Krodha began to worship the Pitrs, to end the curse. They spoke to him in an asariri; ‘You shall end the curse if you denigrate Dharma Deva.’

Thus, the mongoose wandered the wide world, criticizing every great yagna he found. Finally, he arrived at Yudhishtira’s Aswamedha yagna and by censuring Dharma’s son, his very self, Krodha was released from the curse of the manes.’

Ganguli observes that, in his opinion, the entire incident of the mongoose might well be an interpolation.

BOOK 16. Mausala Parva.

1. The omens seen in Dwaraka:

‘Every day, Death, embodied, wandered through the homes of the Yadavas. He had the form of a fierce and terrible man, bald and black-skinned, as well as tawny. The bowmen of Dwaraka shot thousands of arrows at him, but none

pierced that macabre figure.

Day by day, the sea winds blew more roughly and all manners of other evil portents arose—fore-boding the end of the Vrishnis and the Andhakas. The streets swarmed with rats and mice. Earthen vessels cracked on their own, spilling what they contained. At nights, the rats and mice gnawed away the hair and the nails of sleeping men. Sarikas chirped incessantly, inside the houses of the sea city. Sarasas called like owls and goats bayed like jackals.

The strangest birds appeared, Death's messengers, never seen before—pale feathered, with bright red legs. At every hour, pigeons disported in the homes of the Yadus. Cows gave birth to asses, mules to elephant and bitches littered kittens. The mouse was born to the mongoose.

The Vrishnis became sinners, all of them except Balarama and Krishna. They grew shameless, insulted and humiliated their gurus and elders. They showed disrespect toward brahmanas, the manes and the Gods. Wives deceived their husbands and husbands their wives. Sacred fires always cast their flames to the left. At times, they burned with unnatural brilliance, in bright red and blue.

As the sun rose or set over the city, it seemed shrouded by headless figures of men. Wriggling beds of worms, of many kinds, appeared in clean, cooked food, as soon as it was served. When brahmanas blessed the hour of day, as they received gifts or alms, countless heavy footsteps would be heard, running helter-skelter, everywhere. But no one could be seen making that sound.

The planets appeared to repeatedly attack and strike the constellations in the sky. However, no Yadava could ever see, at any time, the sign under which he was born. When they blew their auspicious conches, a dissonant chorus of donkeys brayed in the solemn echo of the bass.

Every night, Vrishni women dreamt of a black hag with white teeth, who laughed maniacally, ran through Dwaraka and their homes and snatched the sacred threads from their wrists. Men dreamt of crimson-eyed vultures entering their houses and yagnashalas and feeding on their bodies.

They saw hideous rakshasas steal their ornaments, standards, armor and other insignia. One day, in plain sight of all the Yadus, the Sudarshana Chakra flashes up into the sky and vanishes. Then, the Jaitra, Krishna's chariot, in Daruka, his sarathy's, sight, disappears in the most unusual manner. The four great horses, Saibya, Sugriva, Meghapushpa and Balahaka, fly off with it at the speed of thought, dragging it across the surface of the sea!

Krishna's Garuda standard and Balarama's with the palmyra, were taken by

apsaras, who called day and night in their sweet, sweet voices to the Yadavas to set out on a yatra to some holy tirtha.’

BOOK 18. Swargarohanika Parva.

1. When they die, most of the great characters of the legend are absorbed, or reabsorbed, as in Bheeshma’s case, into the God or Gods of whom they were amsas.

Bheeshma, of course again becomes the Vasu Prabhasa, or Dyu, when he dies. Drona, enters into Brihaspati, Kritavarman enters the Maruts, Pradyumna again becomes part of Sanatkumara, whose amsa he was, (though it is also told that he was Kama Deva incarnate!), Dhritarashtra attains to Kubera’s realm and Gandhari with him. Pandu, Kunti and Madri attain Indra’s world. Virata, Dripada, Dhristaketu, Nishatha, Akrura, Samba, Bhanukampa, Viduratha, Bhoorisravas, Sala, Bhoori, Kamsa, Ugrasena, Vasudeva and Uttara Kumara are all absorbed into the various Devas.

Soma’s mighty son Varchas was born as Abhimanyu. Abhimanyu become Varchas again, when he dies. Karna enters into Surya, Shakuni was absorbed into Dwapara and Dhristadyumna into Agni Deva. Vidura and Yudhishtira were both absorbed in Dharma Deva. The rakshasas born as Dhritarashtra’s sons all found heaven for themselves, by dying on the field of war.

Balarama became Ananta and went down into patala, where he is the support of Vishnu and the worlds. Krishna, of course, became Vishnu again.

When their time came, the sixteen thousand that had been Krishna’s wives, entered the Saraswati and returned to Vishnuloka as unearthly apsaras. Ghatotkacha and his rakshasas all became lofty yak-shas, Bheema’s son himself was equal to a God. Of the other warrior who perished on Kurukshetra, some went to the world of Indra, some to the realm of Kubera of matchless intellect and others to the marine world of Varuna.

Glossary

Abhichara sorcery. Also a spirit raised by an occult ritual.

Abhichari sorcerer.

Abhisheka investiture.

Acharya a brahmana master.

Achyuta immortal; a name of Vishnu's and Krishna's.

Adharma evil.

Adi kavya first Poem. The Ramayana.

Adisehsa great Serpent, Vishnu's rest.

Aditi mother of the Devas.

Aditya son of Aditi. Being of light, also son of the Sun God.

Adityahridaya lit. heart of the sun.

Agni Fire God

Agni fire.

Agnihotra fire ritual.

Agni kunda fire pit.

Agneyastra fire weapon, missile.

Agneyi self-immolation by invoking inner fire.

Aindastra Indra's astra.

Airavata Indra's four-tusked white, flying elephant.

Akasa sky, cosmic ether, fifth element.

Akhanda universe.

Aksauhini a legion. One version of its size is 21,000 chariots, as many elephants, 65,000 horse and 110,000 footsoldiers. (But this does not tally with the total number of men killed during the Mahabharata yuddha, in 11 aksauhinis!)

Alakananda a name of the Ganga.

Alidha archer's stance.

Amavasya new moon.
Amravati Indra's heavenly city.
Amrita nectar of immortality.
Amsa essence, part.
Ananta Sesa cosmic Serpent on which Vishnu rests.
Anarta Krishna's kingdom.
Anarya ignoble.
Andhaka a Yadava tribe.
Angaraka Mars.
Anima the occult power to make oneself small.
Aniruddha Krishna's grandson.
Anjali offering.
Antapura harem.
Apsara nymph.
Arani a twig from a sami tree. A fire kindled with these is always sacred.
Aranya jungle.
Arati worship with lamps.
Ardha half.
Arghya offering of welcome.
Arya noble.
Aryavarta land of the noble. India. Bharatavarsha.
Aryaman ancestor, the first man. Also, the Sun. Lord of the manes.
Asariri disembodied voice.
Asrama hermitage.
Asramas, the 4asramas of life brahmachari, grihasta, vanaprastha, sannyasi.
Celibate, householder, renun-ciate, hermit.
Astra unearthly weapon.
Asura demon.
Aswamedha yagna horse sacrifice.

Aswattha pipal tree.

Aswins heavenly twins, known for their beauty.

Atharva the fourth Veda, concerned with sorcery, spells, etc.

Atman the individual Soul.

AUM/OM holy syllable, represents the Ultimate Reality.

Avatara Incarnation.

Ayudha weapon.

Bala/atibala strength, extreme strength.

Bhajan devotional song.

Bhakti devotion, worship.

Bhakta devotee.

Bharatavarsha India. The land of Bharata.

Bhasha language.

Bhasma holy ash.

Bhiksha alms, begging.

Bhoja a Yadava tribe.

Bhumi the earth.

Bhumidevi Earth Goddess.

Bhuta ghost, spirit.

Bindu point; mystic singularity.

Brahma God of the Hindu Trinity. The Creator.

Brahmachari a celibate.

Brahmacharya celibacy.

Brahmahatya murder of a brahmana.

Brahman Ultimate Godhead; Holy Spirit; different from Brahma.

Brahmana priestly caste, also 'Brahma's people'.

Brahmarishi sage of Brahman.

Brahmavadi knower of Brahman.

Brahmavidya knowledge of Brahman.

Brighu an ancient rishi.
Brihaspati guru of the Devas. Also the planet Jupiter.
Bhuta spirit, ghost.
Budha Mercury.
Chaitra an auspicious lunar month.
Chaitra Kubera's garden.
Chakra a wheel. In the body, a subtle center of energy along the spinal column and in the brain.
Chakravaka a water bird.
Chakravarti emperor.
Chamara silken whisk.
Chandala an untouchable.
Chandra Moon.
Charana unearthly being.
Chiranjivi long-lived, almost immortal.
Chital a kind of deer.
Chitraratha king of the gandharvas.
Daksha Brahma's son, Sati's father. A prajapati.
Danava demon, son of Danu.
Danda a staff, also punishment.
Daitya demon, son of Diti.
Dakshina south.
Dakshinayana the sun's southern migration.
Darbha a kind of grass.
Darbhasana seat made of darbha grass
Deva a celestial, elemental, being. A God. Also 'Being of Light.' 'Divya' is light.
Devaloka heavenly realm of the Devas.
Devaputra son of a Deva.

Devi Goddess.

Dharma truth, justice.

Dhanu Sagittarius.

Dhanusha bow.

Dhanvantari the original physician, who rose from the sea of milk with the amrita.

Dharma truth, justice, duty, righteousness.

Dhruva North Star.

Dhupa/dhoop heavy, smoky, incense.

dhyana meditation.

Dikpala lord of a direction.

Diksha gift/ offering for a brahmana.

Dvividha a vanara.

Dwapara yuga third great age.

Dwaraka Krishn'a ocean city, raised for him by the Devas.

Dwarapalaka gatekeeper.

Ekarnava the original sea of life.

Gada mace, club.

Gana servitor, companion of Siva.

Gandharva heavenly warrior minstrels. Elf.

Gandharva vivaha marriage by abduction, elopement.

Garuda Vishnu's Eagle.

Gayatri the mother of all mantras.

Ghee clarified butter.

Gochara planetary transit.

Gopa cowherd. Krishna was raised by gypsy cowherds.

Gopi/gopika cowherdess.

Gotra family, clan, lineage.

Graha pravesha formal entry into a new home.
Grihastha householder.
Guna essence in nature. Sattva, rajas and tamas.
Guru preceptor, master.
Guru dakshina a formal fee or gift given to a master by his pupil, when tutelage is complete.
Gurukula stage of life as a student, under a guru.
Gyana knowledge.
Gyani a wise man.
Halahala original poison, which Siva drank.
Hari Vishnu.
Hatya murder.
Havis the burnt offering from a sacrifice.
Himavan Himalaya.
Hiranyagarbha pregnant with the Golden Egg of the Cosmos.
Homa ritual worship.
Ikshvaku Ancestor. A race of the Sun is named after him.
Indra king of the Devas.
Indradhanush rainbow.
Ishta devata personal God.
Jatakarma caste ritual.
Jambavan king of bears.
Jambavati Jambavan's daughter. Krishna's wife.
Janaki Janaka's daughter, Sita.
Janardhana Vishnu.
Janma nakshatra lunar birth star.
Japam chant of God's names.
Jata dreadlocks like rishis wear.
Jaya victory.

Jaya vijayi bhava! Be victorious!
Jitendriya one who has conquered his senses.
Jivatma embodied soul.
Kaala time.
Kadamba a tree.
Kalakuta Halahala. Poison churned up from the kshirasagara.
Kali yuga the fourth and the most evil, of the ages. Not the black Goddess,
Kaali.
Kalpa cosmic tract of time. 1000 yugas.
Kalyana marriage.
Kalyana mantapa marriage hall, enclosure.
Kama God of Love. Also pleasure, enjoyment.
Kamadhenu first, sacred, cow of wishes.
Kamandalu brahmana's water-pot.
Kama shastra sacred arts of loving.
Kanchana golden.
Kanya virgin, maiden, young woman.
Kapila great sage. Vishnu's incarnation.
Karma action, duty, also the fruit of past deeds.
Karttikeya Siva's son.
Kavacha armor.
Kirita crown.
Kiriti Arjuna, after he wore the crown ndra gave him.
Kirtana devotional song.
Kohl collyrium.
Koyal cuckoo.
Krauncha crane.
Krita yuga first of the four ages; the purest, most pristine yuga.
Krodhagraha chamber of anger.

Krosa about 2 miles, a fourth of a yojana.
Kshatriya warrior.
Kshetra field; also, field of experience, knowledge etc.
Kshirasagara mythical sea of milk.
Kubera Lord of treasures. A Deva.
Kula clan.
Kulaguru the teacher of a royal family.
Kulapati head of a clan.
Kundala earrings, ear-studs.
Kurma tortoise: Vishnu's second Avatara.
Kushti wrestling.
Kutula hut.
Lagna ascendant, rising sign.
Lakshmi Goddess of fortune. Vishnu's consort.
Linga phallus, phallic emblem, Siva's.
Madharpaka sweet offering to a guest: usually, honey and milk.
Maha great or powerful.
Maharathika great warrior.
Mahavishnu second God of the Hindu Trinity. The Preserver.
Mahima/ anima the occult siddhis to grow big and small.
Mahodadi great sea.
mahodara consumptionmalaya of a mala, a mountain.
Manasa sarovara holy lake on the Himalaya that Brahma made from his mind.
Mandala dimension, galaxy.
Mangala Mars.
Mantapa pavilion.
Mantra, mantram sacred incantation.
Manu ancestor, law-giver.

Margasirsa, mrigasirsa an auspicious Hindu lunar month.

Maricha demon who turned himself into a golden deer in the Ramayana.

Marma a vulnerable place in the body.

Marut divine companion of Vayu, the Wind God. There are 49 Mauts.

Mathura city of the Yadavas.

matrihatya matricide.

Matsya fish: Vishnu's first Avatara.

Matsya yantra a fish device.

Maya illusion, cosmic illusion; as different from the Reality of God. Also, sorcery.

Maya Goddess of illusion.

Mayaa great demon builder and king.

Mayavi sorcerer.

Meru, Sumeru sacred, golden mountain north of the Himalayas, from which the continents are said to have unfurled. Heart of the world.

Mlechcha alien, untouchable.

Mohini enchantress: Vishnu as a woman.

Moksha liberation, Salvation.

Mowna silence.

Mrityu death.

Mrityunjaya homa a ritual to keep death away.

Mudra hand-sign, gesture of occult power.

Muhurta a small measure of time, esp. an auspicious moment to begin a new enterprise.

Muni seer, rishi. Silent one, knower of minds.

Musth elephant's season/rut.

Naga great serpent; also magical, serpentine beings.

Nakshatra asterism in lunar Hindu astrology. They are 27 stellar goddesses, wives of the Moon.

Nandana Indra's garden.

naracha fiery missile.

Narada a great rishi. Brahma's son, born from his mind. A devotee of Vishnu.

naraka hell.

Narasimha manticore incarnation of Vishnu's.

Narayana the Sleeper on eternity's waters, which are called the Naara. Vishnu.

Nilakanta blue-throated One: Siva.

Nilgai a species of deer.

Nirvana moksha, liberation.

Nishada untouchable.

Nritya dance.

OM, Omkara the primal, holy syllable, which represents Godhead. AUM. Pranava.

Oshadhi healing herb.

Paapa sin.

Paasa noose.

Paativratya fidelity.

Padadhuli lit. 'dust from feet'. A spiritual emanation from a holy person or elder's feet.

Padma lotus.

Padmanabha lotus-naveled. Vishnu. Brahma is born in the lotus that sprouts from Vishnu's navel.

Padmasana lotus-posture.

Padya water for washing the feet.

Panchabhuta the five elements.

Parabrahman Brahman. The ultimate, undifferentiated Godhead.

Paramatman Supreme Soul, God.

Parasurama brahmana incarnation of Vishnu. Axe-bearer.

Parivrajaka mendicant, holy man.

Parthiva linga an earthen phallic symbol.
Parvati Siva's wife, lit. mountain-daughter.
Pasupati lord of animals: Siva.
Patala under-world, nether world.
Pativrata a devoted wife.
Purnima, purnima full moon.
Payasa a liquid sweet.
Phalasruti a description of the fruit, results to be had from listening to or reading a holy text.
Pipal holy tree.
Pisacha evil spirit. Pitama/pitamaha grandfather.
Pitr ancestor. Lit. father.
Pitriloka realm of the manes.
Pradakshina circumambulation, in worship, respect.
Pradyumna Krishna's son.
Prahlada son of the Asura Hiranyakashyipu, but Prahalada was a great Vishnu bhakta.
Prajapati a lord of the first races of men.
Prakriti nature. Ying. Feminine principle.
Pralaya the deluge.
Prana life breath.
Pranava AUM.
Prayatna difficult endeavor.
Prayaschitta penance.
Prayopavesha fasting for a cause, or a boon.
Preta a spirit.
Prithvi the Earth.
Puja/pooja ritual worship.
Punnaga a tree.

Punya virtue, merit.

Purana ancient legend, revelation. Also, collections of such myths about the Gods and their lives and deeds.

Puranika/ pauranika a raconteur, expert on the puranas.

Purohit priest.

Purusha the masculine principle. Yang. Also, soul as opposed to the feminine prakriti, or nature.

Purushottama best among men', Vishnu.

Pushkara lake sacred to Brahma.

Pushpaka vimana sky chariot. UFO!

Putrakama yagna sacrifice for the birth of a son.

Putrasneha attachment/love for one's children.

Raga, raaga special combination of musical notes.

Raghuvamsa the clan of Raghu, an ancient king.

Rahu dragon's head, a demon.

Rajarishi a king who is a sage.

Rajas the second guna: active, energetic.

Rajasuya an imperial sacrifice.

Raksha protection, amulet of protection.

Rakshasa demon.

Rakshasi demoness.

Ratha chariot.

Rathika expert charioteer.

Rekha line of power.

Rik/Rig Veda the first Veda.

Rishabha the second note of the scale. Re.

Rishi sage.

Ritvik priest.

Rohini asterism, goddess, the Moon's favorite wife.

Rudra Siva. Also a class of fierce beings associated with Siva.
Rudraksha holy beads; lit. Siva's tears/eyes.
Rukmini Krishna's wife.
Sabha court, hall.
Sachi Indra's queen.
Sairandhri flower girl to a queen.
Sakhi female companion.
Sama a Veda.
Samadhi absorption in the Soul/God. Mystical trance.
Sambur a species of deer.
Samsara the world of illusion. This life of appearances.
Sanatkumara one of four original sages, born from Brahma's mind.
Sandhi conjunction, cusp.
Sandhya twilight.
Sankara Siva.
Sannyasa asceticism, renunciation.
Sannyasi hermit.
Saptarishi seven sages, born from Brahma's mind.
Sarabha great mythical bird.
Saras lake.
Sarasa water bird.
Saraswati Goddess of learning. Brahma's consort.
Sarathy charioteer.
Saringa Krishna's Bow.
Sati Daksha' daughter. Siva's first wife, who immolated herself and was then born as Parvati.
Sati when a widowed woman kills herself by sitting on her husband's pyre.
Sattva the first, pure guna.
Satyabhama Krishna's wife.

Senapati general; lit., lord of an army.
Shastra scripture.
Shimshupa a tree.
Siddha a self-realized being.
Siddhi occult power.
Sirasasana yogic posture, headstand.
Sishya pupil, disciple.
Siva third God of Hindu Trinity. The Destroyer.
Shavasana corpse-like yogic posture.
Skanda Siva's son, Karttikeya.
Sloka sacred verse.
Soma the Moon God. Also, lunar nectar.
Sraddha death ceremony.
Sruti tone, sacred recitation, text.
Sruva ladle.
Stamba post, pole.
Sudarshana Chakra Vishnu's weapon, a blazing wheel.
Sudharma Indra's court in Amravati.
Sudra fourth Hindu caste, the servitors.
Sukra Venus, guru to the Asuras.
Sukshma/sthula Subtle/gross. Incorporeal/corporeal.
Surya Sun God.
Suryanamaskara yogic ritual for worshipping the sun at dawn.
Suta bard, charioteer.
Sutaputra son of a suta.
Swamini female of swami, saint.
Swapna dream.
Swarga heaven.
Swayamvara the ceremony at which a princess chooses her own husband.

Taala rhythm, beat.

Tamas the third and grossest guna in Nature.

Tandava Siva's dance of dissolution.

Tapasya penance, long meditation or austerity.

Tapasvin one performs tapasya.

Tapovana grove of worship.

Tarpana offering of water for the dead.

Tilaka auspicious mark made on forehead.

Timmingala mythical whale-eater, possibly giant squid.

Tirtha holy place of pilgrimage.

Tirtha yatra pilgrimage.

Treta yuga the second great age.

Trikalagyani one who knows the 3 times.

Trimurti trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

Tripathaga of three paths.

Tripura three sky cities, built by Mayaa, which Siva brought down with a missile of fire.

Trisula trident.

Ucchaisravas horse of the Sun.

Upanishad holy book, dealing with the Brahman, the formless God.

Usanas Venus. Sukra. A male God, guru to the Asuras, as Brihaspati, Jupiter is to the Devas. Greatest of poets.

Uttara Phalguni a nakshatram.

Uttarayana the northern migration of the sun.

Vaastu land, property, house etc. also, the sacred science of these and building. Ancient Indian feng shui.

Vaastu shanti rite for peace in a new dwelling.

Vaikunta Vishnu's celestial city.

Vairagya detachment, relinquishment.

Vaisya third Hindu caste; the traders.

Vaitarani river of death, which separates this world from the next.

Vajra Indra's thunderbolt.

Valkala fabric made of tree-bark, worn by hermits.

Vamana dwarf: Vishnu's fifth Avatara.

Vana jungle, forest.

Vana devata forest god.

Vanara ancient, magical race of monkeys. Lit. dwellers in the vana.

Vanavasa living in the forest as a renunciate.

Vandana worship.

Varaha boar: Vishnu's third incarnation.

Varanasi city sacred to Siva.

Varsha continent. Also, rain.

Varuna God of seas.

Vasantha spring.

Vasuki king of the nagas.

Vayavyastra wind weapon.

Veda ancient book of sacred hymns.

Vedanta lit. the end of the Vedas. Includes the Upanishads. Discourses on the Brahman.

Vedi/vedika altar.

Vetala/i hunter, huntress

Vidya an art.

Vidyadhara magical being.

Vimana sky ship.

Vina Indian stringed instrument, like a lute.

Vina nadam the sound of a vina.

Viswakarma divine artisan.

Viswarupa Cosmic Form.

Vivasat ancestor: the Sun.

vrata vow.

Vrishni a Yadava tribe, to which Krishna belongs.

Vyuha battle formation.

Yaama a measure/hour of the night.

Yadava Krishna's clan.

Yaga, yagna sacrifice.

Yagnapashu sacrificial beast.

Yagnashala enclosure for a sacrifice.

Yajaka one who undertakes a yagna.

Yajus, Yajur Veda a Veda.

Yaksha a forest spirit.

Yama God of Death.

Yamala a tree.

Yamaduta death's messenger, servitor.

yantra occult symbol. A device.

yatra journey, often with religious significance.

Yoga 'union'; union with the Self, with God.

Yogi, yogin one who is united with his higher Self, with God.

Yogini female yogi.

Yojana 8/9 miles approximately.

Yoni vagina. Vaginal symbol at the base of a linga.

Yuddha war.

yuga an age.

yuganta/yugantara conjunction of two ages; a time of change.

yuga sandhi the cusp between two yugas.

yuvaraja crown prince, heir apparent.

About the Author

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Endnotes

1. See the Appendix for some of these names in the Ganguli translation.

1. Another variation is that he offers great force of warlike cowherds called the Narayanas.

2. Before leaving, he meets Kritavarman, lord of the Bhojas, who promises him an aksauhini.

1. See Appendix.

1. In Ganguli's translation, the 4 parvas of the war amount to approximately 1,200 pages. They are full of all sorts of details, especially of duels and battles between minor clans, kings and characters.

Some sections are definitely repetitive, as well. In Sanskrit, all these perhaps have an incantatory effect. Here, I believe I have described all the important events of the war.

1. See Appendix for the omens Vyasa describes here.

2. Upon death, men have first to pass through the realm of the pitrs, the manes, before acquiring a celestial body, with which they can ascend to heaven. Here, the implication is that those dying in the war would acquire their heavenly spirit bodies immediately.

3. Ganguli notes that, at times, Sanjaya himself fights in the war.

4. They are both dark and are frequently referred to as 'the two Krishnas', throughout the parvas of war.

1. Here, at Krishna's behest, Arjuna worships the Goddess Durga before the battle begins. See Appendix for the hymn.

1. Dusasana is often portayed as fighting at the head of a ferocious legion of mlecchas.

1. Ganguli's text says that maidens by thousands gently showered sandalwood powder, fried rice grains and soft flowers over Bheeshma. Also, countless women, old men and children flock to see him on his bed of arrows.

1. See Appendix for a description of the horses, the standards and the bows of some of the kshatriyas.

2. The Ganguli text refers to this knowledge of elephants as Anjalikabedha.

1. He is 'as handsome as a yaksha prince, even a son of Kubera'.

1. Actually, Vyasa discourses at length to Yudhishtira here, on death. The discourse runs into some 25 pages.

1. This applause by the celestials is a frequent occurrence throughout the war, whenever they see any exceptional feat of heroism.

1. He kills Ghatotkacha's son Anjanaparva here, after a prolonged encounter.

2. Ganguli: The Devas, rishis, gandharvas, apsaras, vidyadharas, nagas, yakshas, uragas and kinnaras hold magic lanterns in the sky, too. Here and elsewhere, apsaras fling garlands down on the warriors and sprinkle heaven's perfumes over them, in joy!

1. Ganguli says this is Jatasura's son.

2. Ganguli: Alayudha was Baka's brother.

1. Ganguli: '...the sea of troops wakes like an assemblage of lotuses unfurling to the sun.'

2. This weapon is one that appears in many forms, both protective and destructive.

3. Ganguli mentions Viswamitra, Jamadagni, Gautama, Vasistha, Kashyapa, Atri, Garga, the Srikatas, the Prishnis, the descendants of Bhrigu and Angiras, the Valkhilyas, the Marichis and 'many others'.

4. Drona was fifty-eight, by the Ganguli text. Also, Dhrishtadyumna drags his severed head along the ground, then lifts it and flings it down before the armies.

1. Awatthama asks specifically how Krishna and Arjuna were proof against the agneyastra. See Appendix for Vyasa's answer in greater detail.

1. Also, a force of fierce shepherds called Gopalas comes with Kritavarman. More recently, they are called Gowalas or Ahirs and they are still hired for local brawls and as politicians' musclemen, in certain areas of Bengal and Bihar.

1. Actually, Shalya means a dart or goad. Also, in the original text, Karna loses his temper here and is openly abusive to Shalya and the Madras of whom Shalya is king. He says the Madraka men are deceitful and ignoble and hate their friends, while both Madraka men and women are notoriously loose and vile-tongued, drinking, dancing naked and sleeping with anyone: blood-relatives,

members of their own sex, even servants and slaves. He asks how any virtue could be expected from someone born into such a race.

1. There is more than one reference to vaisya and sudra soldiers, as well as kshatriyas.

2. This confrontation between Arjuna and Yudhishtira is longer in the Ganguli text. Arjuna accuses Yudhishtira of casting aspersions at him, while his brother lay safely in Draupadi's tent and bed, a full yojana from the battle. He says Bheema might upbraid him, for he was in the thick of the fray, having slain eight hundred elephants. Arjuna calls Yudhishtira cruel for accusing him, when he, Arjuna, fought with all his might and heart; he tells of how he had slain countless samsaptakas.

Arjuna brings up the game of dice. Only after all these recriminations, does Yudhishtira melt and apologize abjectly, citing his terror of Karna as his excuse. Then Krishna upbraids Arjuna sharply, asking if he would really have killed his brother.

3. Krishna also describes Karna as being 8 ratnis tall. A ratni is a measure of length from an elbow to a clenched fist.

1. Both are Devaputras and in the sky, the celestials all take one hero's side or the other's. See Appendix.

1. See Appendix for a description of Aswatthama.

2. Krishna calls him Artayani, too.

1. Balarama's pilgrimage is described in 50 pages. This includes the legends of every tirtha he visits.

1. Ganguli's translation adds that a dreadful sound came from the bowels of the earth, while conches and drumrolls echoed. Showers of blood and dust fell from the sky. On every side, frightful beings, headless, but with many arms and legs, danced across the earth. Lakes and deep wells vomited blood and brave warriors trembled. Rivers flowed back toward their sources; women looked like men and men like women. All the Devas, gandharvas, siddhas and charanas returned to their abodes, talking about the awesome duel and its end.

1. The Ganguli translation describes several duels in this section, as also women wailing upon finding their husbands being slaughtered.

2. Also, Death appears as an old black-skinned woman, her eyes and mouth bloody, wearing crimson garlands and unguents, wearing a single red rag and chanting a dismal dirge. She ties the diverse spirits of the slain men and beasts

with a cord and leads them away into the next world.

3. Finally, Krishna gives it to him, but Aswatthama cannot hold it up. Krishna then asks him why he wanted the Chakra and Aswatthama replies, “I meant to fight you with it, Krishna.”

1. Here Gandhari names several of the dead kings and warriors, for some 10 pages.

2. In a nearby section Dhritarashtra asks Yudhishtira how many warriors had died and how many survived. Yudhishtira replies, ‘One billion, six hundred and sixty million and twenty thousand men have fallen in battle. Twenty-four thousand, one hundred and sixty-five escaped with their lives.’

The Ganguli translation. The figure for the dead is not merely absurdly exaggerated, it contradicts every calculation based on the given number of aksauhinis that fought the war.

3. Krishna also says, ‘You double your grief by indulging it. A brahmana woman bears children to practise austerities; the cow brings forth calves to give milk and bear burdens, the mare foals so her colts and fillies may be swift-footed; the sudra women’s children add to the numbers of servitors;

the vaisya woman’s children swell the keepers of cattle. But a kshatriya princess like you brings forth sons to be slaughtered in battle.’

1. The two books have been condensed and combined. Together, they are some 1000 pages long in Ganguli’s translation: the Shanti Parva is 600 pages and the Anusasana Parva 400, approximately.

1. This section of conversations between Yudhishtira and his brothers and Yudhishtira and the Rishis Devasthana, Vyasa and then Krishna himself is some 70 pages long in the full translation. The argument is whether sannyasa is the right course for Yudhishtira to adopt. He believes it is the only course and the others try to dissuade him.

1. Various palaces are given to the brothers: Yudhishtira has Dhritarashtra’s palace, Bheema enters Duryodhana’s, Arjuna gets Dusasana’s, as magnificent, Nakula has Durmarshana’s palace, even grander and Sahadeva begins to live in Durmukha’s palace.

1. The discourse of the patriarch on the dharma of kshatriyas and kings teems, among other things, with creation legends, tales of the devas and the asuras, the rishis, parables and other stories, descriptions of various royal houses and bloodlines, the nature and the art of kingship, legends of great kings of the

past, the yugas and ages gone by, the avatars of God and expositions on the nature of time and God. In Ganguli's translation, the discourse, which runs through both parvas, is about 900 pages long.

1. In this section, Arjuna questions Krishna further about the Gita that the Avatara revealed to him before the war. There is a spiritual discourse of some 70 pages by Krishna, called the Anugita: the little Gita.

1. Ganguli: The rakshasas who had gathered in that room, invisibly, melted away.

2. Ganguli: Sixty-thousand camels, a hundred thousand elephants, a hundred and twenty thousand horses and as many chariots. The mules and men that helped carry the treasure were countless.

3. The Ganguli translation lists the sons and grandsons of the Trigartas, Bhagadatta's son Vajradatta of Pragjyotishapura, the Saindhavas or Sindhus, his own son Babhruvahana of Manipura, Jarasandha's grandson Meghasandhi of Magadha, Sishupala's son Sarabha of Chedi, the Kasis, the Angas, the Kosalas, the Kiratas, the Tanganas, Chitrangada of the Dasarnas, Ekalavya's son—king of the Nishadas—the Dravids, Andhras, Mahishakas, the hillmen of Kolwa and the Surashtras. In Dwaraka, the Yadava youths arrest the horse's carren, but Ugrasena comes out and forbids them.

The Gandharas and Shakuni's son: all these resist Arjuna and he defeats them in battle.

4. See Appendix to discover who the mongoose was.

1. Ganguli says some went back to Devaloka, others to Brahmaloka, some to Varunaloka, some to the realm of Kubera and others to Surya Deva's world. Some returned to the worlds of the rakshasas and pisachas, while celestials spirited others away in their vimanas.

2. Actually, the fire began as Dhritarashtra's sacrificial fire, which his yajaka brahmanas allowed to spread by their carelessness. Thus, the old king met death by being united with his own sacred fire on the banks of the Ganga. It was an auspicious and blessed passing.

1. See Appendix.

1. Yudhishtira once asks Krishna why Arjuna's life had been such a restless one, when he was perfect in every respect, with every auspicious mark on his body. Krishna replies that he agreed Arjuna was almost perfect, but his cheekbones were slightly high: this is why he led a life of frequent wandering.

Draupadi, who is there, flashes an angry glare at Krishna! She can never bear anyone saying a word against her precious Arjuna. (Also, Krishna always calls Panchali 'sakhi' in the Sanskrit text—'friend'.)

1. See Appendix.

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THE MAHABHARATA

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